

## PERCEIVING THE CAUSE OF ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOR: AN UNEXPECTED REVERSAL OF KELLEY'S ATTRIBUTION THEORY<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—An investigation of the applicability of Kelley's (1967) attribution theory to individuals' explanations for their own behavior (self-attributions) was conducted. A reversal of Kelley's predictions was obtained; a response characterized by high distinctiveness and high consensus tended to be attributed to the person as a causal agent, while a response characterized by low distinctiveness and low consensus tended to be attributed to an environmental stimulus. Some theoretical implications of this reversal are discussed.

Kelley's (1967) attribution theory holds that individuals interpret their own and other people's behavior in the context of three kinds of information: (1) *consensus* information—whether or not *other people* produce the same response in the presence of that stimulus; (2) *distinctiveness* information—whether or not the actor makes the same response in the presence of *other stimuli*; and (3) *consistency* information—whether or not the actor makes the same response in the presence of that stimulus on *other occasions*. According to Kelley, individuals will perceive a response to be caused by some entity in the environment (stimulus attribution) when it is characterized by high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency. On the other hand, a response characterized by low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency will be perceived as being caused by the person who made it (person attribution).

Kelley's predictions were confirmed by McArthur (1972) in an investigation of causal attributions made by observers of *another* person's response (observer-attribution). However, the fact that Kelley's theory specifically is concerned with individuals' causal attributions for their *own* response (self-attributions), together with the substantial body of literature concerning possible differences between "self-perception" and "other-perception" (Bem, 1967, 1968; Bem & McConnell, 1970; Jones, Rock, Shaver, Goethals, & Ward, 1968; Jones, Linder, Kiesler, Zanna, & Brehm, 1968; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Kiesler, Nisbett, & Zanna, 1969; Piliavin, Piliavin, Loewenton, McCauley, & Hammond, 1969) indicated the importance of separately investigating the effects of consensus and distinctiveness information on *self*-attributions. This was the purpose of the present study. On the basis of Kelley's (1967) theory and McArthur's (1972) findings, it was predicted that a person would be more likely to perceive the cause of his own behavior as resting within himself (person attribution) if he were provided with low consensus and low distinctiveness information regarding that response than

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if he were provided with either no information or with high consensus and high distinctiveness information.<sup>2</sup>

#### METHOD

##### Subjects

Ss were 116 middle and upper-middle class housewives whose names were randomly selected from a New Haven, Connecticut telephone directory. Of these women, 56 refused to participate, and the remaining 60 were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions.<sup>3</sup>

##### Procedure

A female *E* contacted Ss by telephone between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. She introduced herself as a representative of the New Haven Public Opinion Research Corporation (a fictional organization) who was conducting a survey of housewives' opinions on accident prevention. She told Ss that the information obtained in the survey would be used in a campaign against safety hazards, and she asked if they could spare a few minutes to help further this cause by answering five short questions.

Ss who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to one of three conditions of information: high consensus-high distinctiveness, low consensus-low distinctiveness, or no information.

*High Consensus—High Distinctiveness.*—After agreeing to participate, Ss in this condition were told that survey participants were being asked to answer questions about home-safety or auto-safety, and they were asked which of these causes they would prefer to help out. Their choice of one topic over the other constituted the manipulation of "high" distinctiveness information, inasmuch as this choice makes the act somewhat distinctive: Ss have the cognition that they would rather participate in one survey than another.

After Ss chose a topic, the interviewer informed them that she had contacted 10 women so far and that every one of them had agreed to express her views on the same topic S had chosen. This constituted the manipulation of high consensus information.

*Low Consensus—Low Distinctiveness.*—After agreeing to participate, Ss in this condition were told that survey participants were being asked to answer questions about home-safety or auto-safety, and they were further told that the topic

<sup>2</sup>Because it is very difficult to manipulate Ss' information about their own responses to the same stimulus on other occasions, consistency information was unmanipulated in the present investigation. This procedure is empirically justified by McArthur's (1972) finding that consensus and distinctiveness information each had significant effects on person attribution which were independent of consistency information. In addition, it should be noted that McArthur (1972) found that consistency information had the same effect on person attribution as on stimulus attribution: high as compared with low consistency information increased the likelihood of both. This general finding held true for the particular combinations of consensus and distinctiveness information utilized in the present investigation.

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that, although the high refusal rate may limit the generalizability of the experimental results, it does not impair their internal validity.

on which they would be asked to give their opinions. They were then asked, in view of this necessity, they would be willing to help out either one of these causes. They would be willing to discuss either topic constituted distinctiveness information inasmuch as this lack of somewhat non-distinctive: Ss have the cognition that they would participate in either one of two surveys.<sup>4</sup>

After Ss had agreed to answer questions about a topic supposedly just for the record—which topic they would choose. They were then told that it just so happened that the topic which had been randomly assigned to them. The interviewer ensured that all Ss would be making a causal attribution which was as palatable to them.

Following assignment of a topic, the interviewer informed Ss that she had contacted 10 women so far and that the woman who had agreed to express her views on that topic—just didn't care to participate. This constituted the manipulation of low consensus information.

*No information.*—After Ss in this condition had agreed to participate, the interviewer simply began asking questions about a topic. The first question asked whether S felt that auto-safety or home-safety was more important. The next five questions concerned whichever topic S had chosen. Hence these Ss, like those in the other conditions, participated in the survey of their choice.

Following the above manipulations, all Ss answered questions about safety hazards. *E* then told them that she was persuaded by the information caused people to agree to take part in surveys like this. What they thought prompted them to participate, and their ideas in an open-ended fashion, she asked them to express their opinion: If you had to give just one reason, would you participate because you're the kind of person who is willing to help solve community problems or would you say you participate because you're auto/home-safety? Ss' response to this question—endorsing the first reason constituted a person attribution, and endorsing the second reason constituted a stimulus attribution.

<sup>4</sup>Although the distinctiveness information given to Ss in the present study could not be an exact translation of that given in Kelley's (1950) study, the present manipulation does serve as a perfectly distinctive response as one which is present and does not occur in its absence" (Kelley, 1950, p. 19). Distinctiveness information, indicating willingness to participate, occurs when the thing (e.g., auto-safety) is present, i.e., on the other hand, for Ss given high distinctiveness information, the response is somewhat stimulus specific.



on which they would be asked to give their opinions would be *randomly* determined. They were then asked, in view of this necessity for randomization, if they would be willing to help out either one of these causes. Ss' verbal statement that they would be willing to discuss either topic constituted the manipulation of "low" distinctiveness information inasmuch as this lack of preference makes the act somewhat non-distinctive: Ss have the cognition that they would be willing to participate in either one of two surveys.<sup>4</sup>

After Ss had agreed to answer questions about either topic, E asked them—supposedly just for the record—which topic they would prefer *if* they could choose. They were then told that it just so happened that this was the topic which had been randomly assigned to them. The purpose of this ploy was to ensure that all Ss would be making a causal attribution for an act which was equally palatable to them.

Following assignment of a topic, the interviewer informed Ss in this condition that she had contacted 10 women so far and that she (S) was the *first one* who had agreed to express her views on that topic—that the rest of the women just didn't care to participate. This constituted the manipulation of low consensus information.

*No information.*—After Ss in this condition had agreed to participate, the interviewer simply began asking questions about safety hazards. The first question asked whether S felt that auto-safety or home-safety was a more important issue. The next five questions concerned whichever topic S indicated she thought was more important. Hence these Ss, like those in the two experimental conditions, participated in the survey of their choice.

Following the above manipulations, all Ss answered five short questions on safety hazards. E then told them that she was personally rather interested in what caused people to agree to take part in surveys like the present one. She asked Ss what they thought prompted them to participate, and, after they had expressed their ideas in an open-ended fashion, she asked the following, more pointed question: If you had to give just one reason, would you say you participated mainly because you're the *kind of person* who is willing to take part in surveys about community problems or would you say you participated mainly because the *issue* was auto/home-safety? Ss' response to this question was the dependent measure—endorsing the first reason constituted a person attribution; endorsing the second reason constituted a stimulus attribution.

<sup>4</sup>Although the distinctiveness information given to Ss regarding their *own* response in the present study could not be an exact translation of that given by McArthur (1972) to *observers* of a response, the present manipulation does seem consistent with Kelley's definition of a perfectly distinctive response as one which "uniquely occurs when the thing is present and does not occur in its absence" (Kelley, 1967, p. 197). For Ss given low distinctiveness information, indicating willingness to participate in a survey does not "uniquely occur when the thing (e.g., auto-safety) is present, i.e., it is not stimulus specific." On the other hand, for Ss given high distinctiveness information, willingness to participate is somewhat stimulus specific.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A chi-square analysis performed on the frequency of person and stimulus attribution in the three information conditions proved significant ( $\chi^2 = 6.54$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Table 1). Comparisons among the individual proportions indicated a reversal of the predicted effect: Low consensus-low distinctiveness information produced significantly less person attribution than did high consensus-high distinctiveness information ( $z = 2.22$ ,  $p = .026$ , two-tailed).<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1  
FREQUENCY OF PERSON ATTRIBUTION AND STIMULUS ATTRIBUTION  
IN THREE CONDITIONS OF INFORMATION

Attribution Causal	Information		
	High Consensus— High Distinctiveness	No Information	Low Consensus— Low Distinctiveness
Person	14	11	6
Stimulus	6	9	14

It had been anticipated that the effects of consensus and distinctiveness information on self-attributions would be somewhat weaker than they had been in McArthur's (1972) investigation of observer-attributions. In the first place, it is virtually impossible to make distinctiveness information concerning a person's own behavior as strong as distinctiveness information concerning another person's behavior; an individual knows very well those "stimuli" to which he has made a given response and those to which he has not. *E* can modify this information by creating new inputs, but there are limitations imposed by the individual's intimate knowledge of his own behavior. *S* in the present study who has participated in various other surveys is unlikely to think her present behavior is particularly distinctive even if *E* gets her to choose one survey over another. Similarly, the person who has not participated in any other surveys—and indeed, who has refused to participate in some—is unlikely to think her present behavior is particularly non-distinctive even if *E* does get her to say she will take part in either of two surveys.

A second reason to expect the effects of information to be weaker in this study is that consistency information was not provided. McArthur (1972) found that the tendency for low consensus and low distinctiveness information to yield more person attribution than high consensus and high distinctiveness information was much stronger given high consistency information than given low consistency information; one would expect this tendency to be of intermediate strength given no consistency information.

Although the relative weakness of distinctiveness information together with

<sup>5</sup>Of the 60 Ss, 29 preferred the issue of home-safety, and 31 preferred auto-safety. Causal attributions did not vary as a function of survey topic.

the absence of consistency information leads one to expect effects on self-attributions than had been obtained in the first study. If these factors cannot explain the obtained reversal. McArthur's (1972) study, regardless of distinctiveness information, low consensus-high distinctiveness information yielded more person attribution on the part of observers than did high consensus-low distinctiveness information. And, regardless of consistency information, low consensus-low distinctiveness information each yielded more person attribution than did high consensus-high distinctiveness information, respectively. It is the nature of distinctiveness information or consistency information that produces different effects on self-attributions than one would expect inasmuch as the distinctiveness information provided in the present study was relatively weak, it seems most likely that the effects in the consensus information.

One possibility worth investigating concerns the effects of consensus information. Festinger's social comparison theory emphasizes the importance of information relevant to the evaluation of one's behavior, to individuals who are attempting to evaluate their behavior in the absence of an internal or well-defined standard. Consensus information is germane not only to the evaluation of that behavior but also to the evaluation of that behavior. To the extent that you did does not merely serve an informative function, the cause of your behavior rests within yourself. Under these conditions, consensus information may serve a normative function, viz., indicating you should behave in a certain way. This implication could produce defensive stimulus attributions to justify the behavior. (The stimulus evokes/merits a response, particularly, to learn that everyone else did what you did or that you did not. The cause of your behavior rests within the environment. It may also indicate that your behavior was sheeplike. This could produce defensive person attribution which serves to justify the behavior. (I initiated/chose to make the response. Consensus information would obviously not yield a response of observers of a response, who should have no "appropriate" response to the person or a "sheeplike" response to the stimuli.

In all fairness to Kelley, it should be noted that the attribution process is subject to error. Indeed, he discussed a number of possible sources of error which had first been identified by Kelley (1950): (1) the relevant situation is ignored; (2) egocentric effects (of the response) have affective significance; (3) the surrounding situation is misleading. The most common source of error: (5) the causal information is attributed to the individual.



the absence of consistency information leads one to expect weaker information effects on self-attributions than had been obtained for observer-attributions, these factors cannot explain the obtained reversal. McArthur (1972) found that, regardless of distinctiveness information, low consensus information yielded more person attribution on the part of observers than did high consensus information. And, regardless of consistency information, low consensus and low distinctiveness information each yielded more person attribution than did high consensus and high distinctiveness information, respectively. It seems then that something in the nature of distinctiveness information or consensus information or both produces different effects on self-attributions than on observer-attributions. And, inasmuch as the distinctiveness information provided to Ss in the present investigation was relatively weak, it seems most likely that the clue to the reversal lies in the consensus information.

One possibility worth investigating concerns the two-pronged nature of consensus information. Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) argues convincingly for the importance of information relevant to social comparison, i.e., *consensus* information, to individuals who are attempting to evaluate their behavior in the absence of an internal or well-defined standard. Hence we see that consensus information is germane not only to the causal attribution of a given behavior but also to the evaluation of that behavior. To learn that no one else did what you did does not merely serve an *informative* function, viz., indicating that the cause of your behavior rests within yourself. Under certain circumstances, it may serve a *normative* function, viz., indicating your behavior was inappropriate. This implication could produce defensive stimulus attribution which serves to justify the behavior. (The stimulus evokes/merits the response I made.) Similarly, to learn that everyone else did what you did does not merely indicate that the cause of your behavior rests within the environment; under certain circumstances it may also indicate that your behavior was sheeplike. This implication could well produce defensive person attribution which serves to claim responsibility for the behavior. (I initiated/chose to make the response I made.) The dual nature of consensus information would obviously not yield defensive attribution on the part of *observers* of a response, who should have no qualms about attributing an "inappropriate" response to the person or a "sheeplike" response to environmental stimuli.

In all fairness to Kelley, it should be noted that he recognized that the attribution process is subject to error. Indeed, he discusses at some length a number of possible sources of error which had first been enumerated by Heider (1958): (1) the relevant situation is ignored; (2) egocentric assumptions are made; (3) the effects (of the response) have affective significance for the individual; and (4) the surrounding situation is misleading. The present results suggest an additional source of error: (5) the *causal information* has affective significance for the individual.



Although attribution of the obtained reversal to the affective significance of consensus information seems quite plausible, the possibility of course remains that distinctiveness information was at least partially responsible for this effect. Research currently under way is seeking to demonstrate that consensus information by itself is sufficient to produce the reversal as well as attempting to determine some conditions under which consensus information will not have this effect. In the meantime, the present results clearly indicate that predictions from Kelley's attribution theory do not always hold true when people are interpreting their own behavior.

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## RELATIONSHIP OF ROTTER'S TRUST SCALE AND SOC

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*Summary.*—Contrary to Rotter's findings the Interpersonal Trust Scale did not differentiate students ( $n = 959$ ) categorized according to soc

Since publication in 1967, Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale as a measure of interpersonal trust in a variety of situations (1970b). Fitzgerald, Pasewark, and Noah (1970) has responded concerning the efficacy of the scale for college students having theoretically differing degrees of social class (Pasewark, & Noah, 1970a).

The present study is a further investigation of the Interpersonal Trust Scale as a measure of interpersonal trust in a variety of situations reported that individuals of lower social-class status do those of higher social class. However, in a study of college students classified for social class on the basis of parental occupation there is considerable question whether such a classification can be accurately categorized for social class using the Interpersonal Trust Scale study employed a less select group.

There were 959 students enrolled in junior and senior classes at the University of Wyoming. All students present on the day of the study completed a scorable record were included as subjects. Mean age of females was 15.2 yr. and males 15.5 yr. of 14 to 17 yr.

Results are presented in Table 1 with the Interpersonal Trust Scale (1961) in which each decile unit

TABLE 1  
INTERPERSONAL TRUST SCORES OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
CLASSIFIED BY PARENTAL OCCUPATION

Social Class decile	Males			
	M	SD	N	F
1 — 3	71.63	8.61	51	71.94
4 — 7	71.35	8.59	191	74.56
8 — 10	73.24	11.33	232	73.35
1 — 10	72.31	10.05	474	73.61