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# The effect of stereotypes on attributional processes.

James Edward Sexton  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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THE EFFECT OF STEREOTYPES  
ON ATTRIBUTIONAL PROCESSES

A Thesis Presented

by

JAMES EDWARD SEXTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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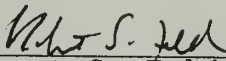
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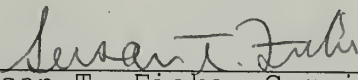
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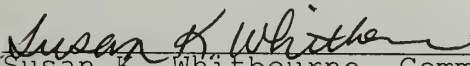
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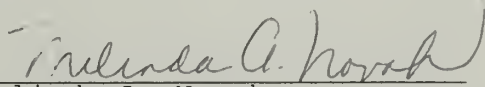
JAMES EDWARD SEXTON

Approved as to style and content by:

  
Robert S. Feldman, Committee Chair

  
Susan T. Fiske, Committee Member

  
Susan K. Whitbourne, Committee Member

  
Melinda A. Novak,  
Psychology Department Chair

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

Each day we try to understand other people's behavior. Typically we are not even aware of this process, but if we are asked, we can easily explain the cause of another person's actions. We construct such explanations even though we lack omnipotent sight into the person's personality or the true impact of the situation on their behavior. This act of attributing a cause to a person's behavior is known as making an attribution. Attributions are a way people understand and eventually predict the behavior of others.

A biased attribution can often be an event of little significance. At times though, our predisposition for making certain kinds of attributions can lead us to make poor and unfair decisions concerning others and potentially even lead to acts of discrimination. Understanding how attributions can be biased or incorrect can help us avoid misunderstandings and potentially help us gain a more accurate view of the world.

Attributions are the result of a multistage process. According to the most basic model (Gilbert, Pelhan and Krull 1988), the first stage is when the behavior is categorized. First, we see the behavior and interpret it. The second stage involves a relative automatic association of the behavior with the person's disposition. A person acting anxious is seen as an anxious person. Finally, if we have the cognitive resources and motivation, we may correct that initial dispositional attribution for mitigating information about the situation. The person may be seen as less of an anxious individual in general when we acknowledge he or she is speaking to a large audience.

There are two interesting interpretations that follow from this model. The first is that the only time that we use the situation to explain someone's behavior is when we are sufficiently able and motivated to do so. The second is that if we deprive people of resources, we can trick them into making a dispositional attribution regardless of their previous image of the actor. This would be particularly useful if we wished to force someone into making a positive attribution about a person in a stereotyped group. However,

when we dig deeper into the theories that form the backdrop of the process of making an attribution, it appears this may not be that easy.

Gilbert, Pelham and Krull (1988) cite Quattrone (1982) as providing the basis for their model. Quattrone's model in turn builds on one of the basic concepts underlying many attribution theories which was derived from Heider's (1944, 1958) initial analysis of the phenomenon. This basic concept is that when perceivers see a person perform a behavior, the person and the act typically are seen as forming a causal unit and the perceiver responds with a dispositionally-biased attribution.

Thus, one possible unit is between the act and the actor. This particular unit should occur frequently due to the close temporal and spatial proximity of the act to the actor. The act-actor unit is also theorized to be a common unit formation due to a general attributional set of perceivers in Western culture to perceive the actor as the origin of the act. Cross-cultural work has achieved some success in demonstrating that in other cultures the bias is towards grouping the act with the situation rather than the actor, suggesting some other cultures may have, in general,

a situationally biased attribution set (Fletcher, & Ward, 1988). A third relevant factor taken from Heider involves the perceived similarity of the actor to the act. Act-actor units are more likely to occur when the act is similar to the perceiver's preconception of the actor.

The possibility raised by Heider that such attributional sets or expectations could result in a situation-behavior unit rather than actor-behavior unit was one of the cornerstones of the anchor-adjustment theory of attributional processing (Quattrone, 1982). The perceiver begins with an evaluation of the behavior, and then this evaluation of the behavior is used as an anchor for an estimate of either the actor's disposition or the situation, depending on which causal unit is formed. After the behavior is used to anchor the estimate, the perceiver adjusts this initial estimate for additional information in the final step.

An elaboration of Gilbert's basic model by Krull (1993) reintroduces the concept from Quattrone's model that the situation and behavior can form the initial unit. He suggests that while our society tends to have a default bias towards dispositional attributions, it is also possible for

people to follow an alternative process where the situational attribution is made first, and is then followed by a dispositional correction.

In Krull's mixed model, outlined in Figure 1, the first step for both processes is the same as in the three-step model, categorization. However, the second step depends on whether a dispositional or situational goal has been triggered. The third step is now either a dispositional or situational correction, respectively.

The new part of Krull's model involves the addition of the situational goal process. After the behavior is categorized, it is paired with the situation. Only later are these attributions corrected due to deeper processing of the person's behavior.

Occurs  
Before  
Process  
Begins

Attributional Set \*

Dispositional  
Goal

Situational  
Goal

Automatic  
Process

Categorization

Categorization

Mildly  
Deliberate  
Process

Dispositional  
Characterization

Situational  
Characterization

Very  
Deliberate  
Process

Situational  
Correction

Dispositional  
Correction

\* = Implicit in Krull's model, (added by current author).

Figure 1. Krull's Mixed Model

In order to induce the different goals, Krull manipulated which process participants followed by simply giving them different explicit attributional goals. He activated a dispositional goal by telling the observers that their task was to evaluate the person. To give observers a situational goal, the participants were told their task was to evaluate how much anxiety the interviewer's questions would provoke.

While this gives us an indication of how observers can react differently when they enter the attributional process with different goals, the question remains what naturalistic factors could trigger the activation of these different processes, especially factors inherent in the target person.

It is predicted that one possible trigger that could cause a situational goal to be initiated, outside of an explicit goal manipulation, relates to stereotype activation. The first two stages of the attributional process are thought to occur almost automatically, so anything that could have an impact on the initial steps of the attribution process would also have to be relatively automatic. Most research suggests that stereotypes are very easy to activate, and can be activated by stimuli that last

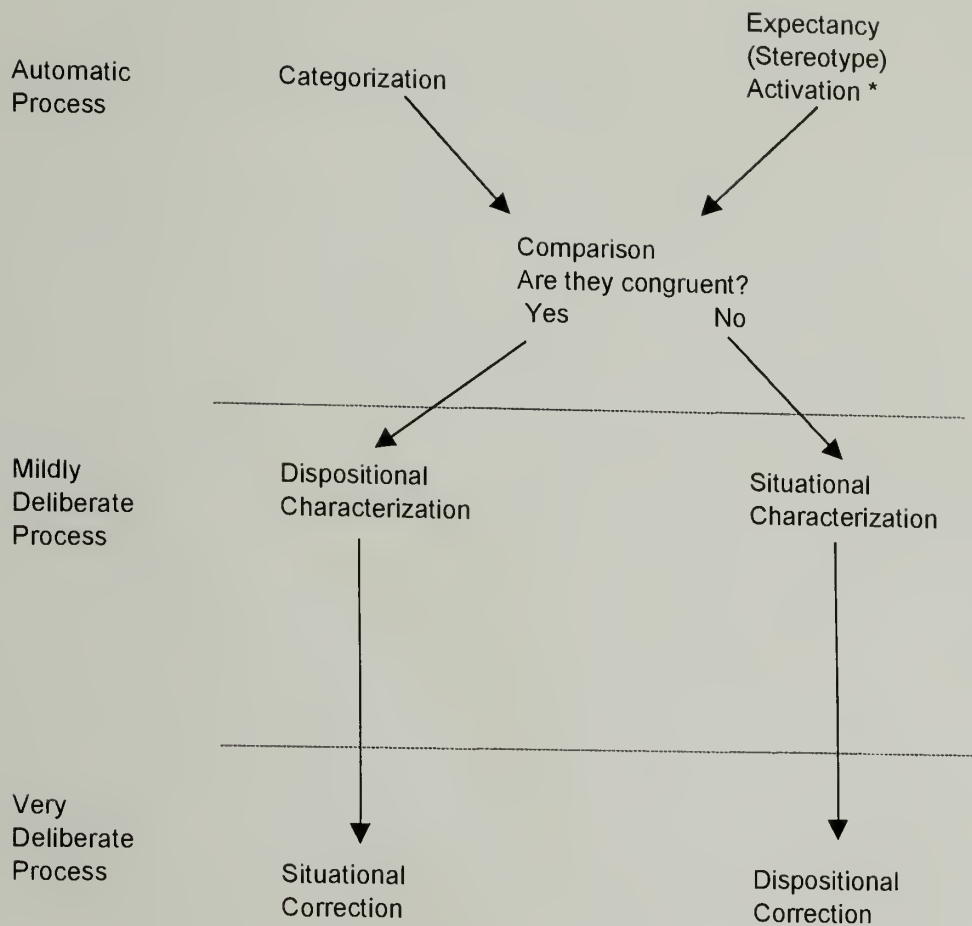
less than a second, (Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986; McCrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994), which is less time than the observed act takes to be completed, let alone processed. Assuming that stereotype information can be activated relatively automatically, stereotypes would likely play a role in which process is activated.

The proposed model is depicted in Figure 2. The first stage of behavior categorization has been expanded to include simultaneous, automatic stereotype activation.

When group membership is easily identified, a stereotype may be activated which contains certain assumptions and expectations about the person's disposition.

After the stereotype has been activated and the behavior has been categorized, these two components are brought together in the next stage in an attempt to form a causal unit. This comparison stage is theorized to be still relatively automatic. If the two components are congruent, in other words they activate the same concepts on the relevant dimension, then the dispositional-first attributional process is followed and an act-actor causal unit is formed. Likewise, when the stereotype is irrelevant to the behavior, or there just is no stereotype, the general





\* = If there is no expectancy, then a dispositional-first process will be followed, given that is the cultural norm and attribution set.

Figure 2. Proposed Model

cultural attributional set towards dispositional explanations will result in an act-actor causal unit and a dispositional-first process.

However, when the behavior is inconsistent with the expectancy, a situational-first attributional process will be activated. When the act and the actor do not fit together, the observer experiences shock, disbelief and quickly turns to the situation as a probable cause.

Another aspect of the mixed model (Krull, 1993) that remains to be tested involves a full test of what occurs during the first stage of the situational-first attribution process. Unfortunately, Krull only explored the cases where the situation was a probable cause of the actor's behavior. He did not include conditions in which the situation was not the probable cause of the behavior. Essentially, participants in his study only saw a person who acted anxious in response to interview questions likely to cause anxiety, but not a person acting anxious in response to a set of interview questions that would be unlikely to produce anxiety. Since the situational information was uniform, there is no way to judge if the situational information was being evaluated as a causal source, or was just assumed to

be a causal source. The participants rated the situation as highly causal, but the question remains if they would still rate the situation as highly causal if it were not a likely cause of the behavior.

Krull (1993) does discuss this issue to some extent and concludes that while in a normal dispositional-first process the person is the initial focus of evaluation, in a situational-first process, it is the situation that is evaluated first. This would lead us to the prediction that observers who are following a situational-first process and see a person acting anxious in response to anxiety producing questions will rate the situation as highly anxiety producing. They will use the congruity between the act and the situation to conclude that the actor's disposition is the same as the initial stereotype implied. Observers following the same stereotype driven, situational-first process who see a person acting anxious in response to non-anxiety questions will rate the situation as not highly anxiety producing. This group will use this incongruity between the act and the situation to conclude that the actor must be different from his or her stereotype group and make a hasty dispositional attribution.

After the situation has been assessed, given time and resources, the final stage of the situational-first process would be the dispositional correction stage. The concept of a dispositional correction is still unexplored. In the dispositional-first process, the observer's attention turns towards the situation. In the case where the behavioral expectation is due to a stereotype, a dispositional correction involves the observer's attention turning primarily towards the disposition. This is especially true when the previous stage has resulted in a dispositional attribution. After all, there is still some tension left over from the lack of fit between the stereotype and the behavior. In this case, when the situation was implausible, the actor is sub-typed into a category that allows the behavior in order to preserve the overall stereotype (Fiske & Neuberg 1986).

So we have a prediction for the case when the situation is implausible. The case for when the situation is not plausible is somewhat more complex since at this point both the individual and the situation have been rejected as easy possibilities. If the situation is also implausible, the observer makes a hasty individuation of the actor, and

decides that they are unlike their stereotyped group. The dispositional correction would be a motivated response to restore the stereotype and disregard the behavior.

In order to demonstrate the second and third stages of the attributional process, both the three-step model and the mixed model use a cognitive load to freeze participants at the second stage while non-cognitively loaded participants are seen as being able to reach the final, correction stage.

The two ingredients required for observers to reach the final stage are cognitive resources and motivation. Thus, all participants are asked to try to come up with the most accurate assessment of the actor's personality. This results in several counter-intuitive responses. If people are following a dispositional-first process, in real life they would tend to stop at the second stage. That anxiously behaving person is anxious. However, the motivation to be accurate and the knowledge that others will be observing their decisions pressures them to consider the situation in the third stage. Likewise, for participants following the situation-first process, we expect for people to strive to be accurate by determining in the third stage that it is

possible that that the anxious acting person really is anxious despite the situation.

## 1.2 Summary and General Predictions

One purpose of this study is to replicate previous research to provide further evidence of the nature of attributional processes and also to demonstrate that this study is addressing the same phenomenon. A second purpose is to extend Krull and determine if the situational-first process involves an assessment of the situation as a cause or whether the situation is merely assumed to be the cause.

A third purpose is to demonstrate that the situation-first process can be triggered by something outside of direct attributional goal manipulation. The final purpose is to explore the process of dispositional correction.

It is predicted that an observer's stereotype (behavioral expectation) about a person can determine whether the situation is initially considered or not when the observer is deciding what caused this person to perform a particular behavior. The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate that congruence or incongruence between activated stereotypes and observed behavior can lead to different attributional processes.

With this in mind, to test whether stereotype-behavior congruency or incongruency can affect the attributional process, two actors were selected so that stereotypes would prompt different expectation concerning the target behavior (anger). Expectations for the target behavior were either congruent with the actual behavior (African-American actor), or incongruent (Asian-American actor) according to a pretest. A second factor involves a cognitive load task that is used to deny the required additional resources of half of the observers in order to assess what type of attributions they made before the correction stage. Finally, a third factor is a situational plausibility manipulation that included questions that could either plausibly provoke anger in the average person, or were neutral and thus implausible causes of anger. The situation implausible condition is of special interest because it helps us determine if participants are actually assessing the situation to some degree in the first stage rather than just assuming it is anger provoking.

To determine if participants were following a dispositional-first or situational-first process it is necessary to compare cognitively busy conditions. If they

show no difference in their ratings despite viewing a different situation, then they are using a dispositional-first process. If they do use situational information despite being cognitively loaded and rate the person and the situation differently depending on the situation, then they are using a situational-first process.

Third stage corrections can be seen by comparing cognitively busy participants to their non-cognitively busy counterparts who have been exposed to the same situation information. If the means differ, then additional situational, behavioral or dispositional information has been considered. For dispositional-first processes, corrections are only expected when the situation was a plausible cause of the behavior.

Dispositional corrections found in situational-first processes are expected to be more complex. In the case where the situation was plausible, it would initially be seen as the cause. A dispositional correction in this case would take the form of revising your perception of the actor either to a sub-stereotype or individuating the actor so that it is possible to view the actor's behavior being a cause of the behavior. If the situation was not a plausible



cause, then the observer would have to assume the disposition was the cause without the opportunity of too much consideration of the behavioral information. A dispositional correction would involve restoring the stereotype and discounting the behavioral information.

### 1.3 Specific Predictions

It is expected that because of the content of the relevant stereotypes, cognitively-busy observers of an African-American actor will respond with a dispositional-first bias, while cognitively-busy observers of an Asian-American actor will respond with a situational-first bias. Thus, cognitively-busy participants who are exposed to an African-American actor are expected to rate the actor the same, regardless of the situation, while cognitively-busy participants who are exposed to the Asian-American actor are expected to attempt to pair the behavior with the situation and rate the actor as more angry when the situation is not a plausible causal source.

In contrast to the cognitively-busy conditions, non-cognitively-busy observers of African-American are expected to adjust, or correct, their initial attributions, depending on the plausibility of the situation. When questions are

anger provoking, observers of the African-American actors are expected to rate the actor as less dispositionally angry.

On the other hand, non-cognitively-busy observers of the Asian-American actor are expected to re-evaluate only the dispositional dimension of their attributions. When the situation is plausible, the dispositional correction results in sub-typing and a dispositional attribution is made. When the situation is implausible, the dispositional correction is expected to result in a moderation of the initial attribution.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### 2.1 Overview

Participants were exposed to one of two actors of different races in order to activate different stereotypic expectations before they read a transcript of an interview supposedly conducted earlier with the actor. Half the participants were depleted of cognitive resources by being told that they should underline, count, and memorize the hesitations of both the person interviewed and the interviewer.

Because employing two different actors could create a potential confound in that the actors could actually be behaving differently, it was necessary to control for this possibility. Consequently, observers were only shown a brief 5-second video clip of the actor, who was simply sitting in a chair, filling out a short questionnaire. This video clip was shown under the pretext of obtaining the actor's transcript number. Once the number appeared, the monitor was turned off, and the participants were handed a transcript in which the actor behaved identically in all conditions.

In five of the eight question-and-answer segments in the transcript, the person who was interviewed responded to each question in a neutral fashion. However, in three of the segments, the person who was interviewed responded in an angry fashion. Half of the participants read interview questions preceding the angry segments that were pretested to be neutral. The other participants read interview questions preceding the angry response segments that were pretested to be anger provoking.

After reading the transcript, the participants were asked to rate the actor on both how angry they thought he would be in general, as a measure of the degree of his dispositional anger, and also how angry these questions would make the average person, as a measure of the degree of his situational anger. The participants were next asked to recall the number of hesitations in the transcript, and what the actor looked like. Finally, everyone was probed for suspicion and thoroughly debriefed.

## 2.2 Participants

The participants were 126 students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who participated for extra credit in psychology courses. The racial breakdown of the

participants revealed that 88 percent were Caucasian-American. Because subsequent analysis showed that there was no difference in the results according to racial background, all participants, regardless of race, were included in the analysis. The participant's gender also did not have an effect on the results; 85 participants were female, 41 were male.

### 2.3 Behavior and Actor Selection

To choose the stereotyped behavior and relevant actors, a pilot study was conducted in which participants (predominantly Caucasian-American) were given a free response task and asked to list what they believed were common stereotypes of people from various races. The major finding from these data was the existence of a clear stereotype that African-Americans tend to be angry, while Asian-Americans were seen as being polite. This finding implied that the behavior of anger would be a useful target behavior to use since different groups prompted different stereotypic expectations on this dimension. In order to activate these stereotypes in the study, participants were shown one of two actors in a brief video clip, followed by a transcript where the actor demonstrated angry behavior. The

first of the two actors was an African-American. It was expected the African-American actor to elicit an expectation of angry behavior, which would result in a bias towards attributing the anger he displayed to his disposition.

The second actor was an Asian-American. However, because the nature of the Asian-American stereotype, it was not expected that the same bias towards a dispositional-first attribution would occur here. Instead, it was expected that a situational-first bias would occur.

#### 2.4 Initial Instructions

Before the participants arrived at the laboratory, they were randomly assigned to one of twelve conditions. On arrival at the laboratory, participants were greeted by a male experimenter who gave a brief introduction to the experiment, and provided them with an informed consent form.

The initial instructions stated that the participants would be acting as coders for the experimenter. A (non-existent) previous study was described where athletes and academics have been asked a series of questions. These questions were described to all of the participants as ranging from being neutral to being designed to provoke a great deal of emotion.

Next, they were told that because a large number of people were interviewed for over an hour, each participant would only see eight samples from one person in order to keep from overloading anyone. It was stated that what was being examined was the difference in emotionality between people who do well in athletics, compared with academics. This cover story was designed to reduce suspicion when viewing different races in the videotape. It was expected the participants would not be surprised to see people of different races after hearing this cover story, based on the finding from the pilot study that some other common stereotypes are that African-Americans do well in athletics, and that Asian-Americans do well in academics.

It was also mentioned in the initial instructions that the study was examining differences in emotion displayed with body language, compared to emotion displayed through the voice cues or emotion displayed through word choice. At this point, the experimenter announced he would be rolling a die supposedly to determine whether the participants watched the video for body language cues, listening to the tape for voice cues, or reading a transcript for word choice cues to determine the amount of emotion displayed in the interview.

After the die roll, all participants were informed they would be reading a transcript and were given brief "training" on how to evaluate a transcript. The training consisted of three basic techniques to assess the amount of emotion in a transcript. One method was described as recreating the interview by picking voices for the interviewer and the person interviewed. A second method suggested searching for certain emotion-laden adjectives, adverbs or curse words. The third method concerned watching for hesitations, which could be useful in detecting the degree of emotion. This final method was mentioned only briefly for the non-cognitive load conditions, and was used as an introduction for the cognitive load counting task in the other conditions.

## 2.5 Cognitive Resource Depletion

During the brief training on how to evaluate the transcript, all participants were informed that a useful cue to use in judging how much emotion is being expressed is to pay attention to the number of hesitations by the person interviewed, as well as the number of hesitations by the supposedly unrehearsed, naive student interviewer. It was



explained that people hesitate when they are feeling a great deal of emotion and are searching for the best words to express themselves, and in addition, the interviewer might be hesitating in reaction to a strong display of emotion by the person he or she was interviewing.

Participants in the cognitive busyness condition were told part of their task consisted of underlining, counting and memorizing the number of hesitations of both the interviewer and the person interviewed in the transcript. Immediately after they finished the transcript, they were given a questionnaire. In order to prevent them from completing the third stage of the attributional process during the brief wait, they were asked to rehearse the numbers of hesitations until we reached them with a questionnaire so that they did not forget the number in the brief interlude.

## 2.6 Stereotype Activation Manipulation

After the participants were given a brief training on how to evaluate a transcript, the experimenter started the videotape, which featured either an African-American, or an Asian-American sitting in a chair. As if he was simply trying to fill the silence, the experimenter off-handedly

mentioned that the person in the videotape was the person the participant would be evaluating. The experimenter then explained that he needed to get the identification number for the transcript of person in the videotape. Once the number appeared on the video screen, the experimenter stopped the tape, wrote down the number and selected the appropriate transcript from a file box.

In addition to the manipulation of the brief video clip, which identified the race of the stimulus person, the transcript had either the name "Jamaal" or "Xiang" on the front page above a fictitious participant number and interview date. The use of these names was meant to reinforce the apparent race of the stimulus person (either African-American or Asian-American, respectively).

## 2.7 Plausibility Manipulation

The participants were told that the questions were pre-selected to either be neutral or provoke varying degrees of emotion. These questions were then supposedly administered to the target person by naive interviewers who were participants like themselves. Two transcripts were constructed and contained eight questions and answers, with one question-and-answer per page. The answer sections were

identical in both transcripts, and included five neutral responses and three angry responses. The questions were the same in the two transcripts, except for the questions preceding the angry responses. For the situation-plausible condition, the three key questions were ones that were pre-tested to be anger provoking, or were seen as likely to provoke an angry response. For the situation-implausible (disposition-plausible) condition, the three key questions were pre-tested to be neutral, and were not seen as likely to provoke an angry response.

The questions covered the same topics. The anger provoking questions were: "Have you ever betrayed a close friend," "I'd like you to describe someone you hate" and, "Tell me about a mistake you made recently, and why you didn't prevent it." The corresponding neutral questions were, "What are your relationships with your best friend like," "I'd like you to describe some other people who are important to you" and, "Tell me about something you've done recently."

Following exposure to the transcript, participants completed the dependent measures.

## 2.8 Dependent Measure: Dispositional Anger

Participants were asked to rate how emotional they thought the person interviewed would be, in general, on a group of six scales. These six scales consisted of 11-point scales anchored with the phrases very little and very much.

Above each scale was one of the following emotions: sad, angry, relaxed, happy, anxious, and pleasant. Only the angry scale was of interest, the others were fillers.

## 2.9 Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to recall the actor's gender, race, and hair color to insure that they noticed the person in the videotape.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### 3.1 Manipulation Check

All but eight participants correctly remembered the race of the actor from the videotape. The eight who could not recall the actor's race were excluded from all analyses.

#### 3.2 Dependent Variables

A multivariate analysis of variance with a 2 (cognitive load) x 2 (plausibility) x 2 (stereotype group) design was performed on both of the dependent variables, ratings of the actor's dispositional anger and ratings of how anger provoking the situation was. A main effect for plausibility was found,  $F(2,110) = 12.125$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that across all 8 conditions there was a tendency to take the situation into account. Overall, the plausible situation was rated as more anger provoking with a mean of 5.1 versus the average implausible situation rating of 3.338. This was qualified, however, by both a two-way interaction between cognitive load and plausibility,  $F(2,110) = 3.836$ ,  $p = .025$ , and a three-way interaction,  $F(2,110) = 6.011$ ,  $p = .003$ .

Duncan pairwise comparisons were performed on the means and the results are summarized in Table 1 and presented graphically in Figure 3.

### 3.3 Post-hoc Pairwise Comparisons

Comparisons between the cognitively busy conditions where the question was plausible or implausible should theoretically determine if participants were taking the situation into account when they made their attributions. As expected, there was no difference for cognitively busy participants who saw an African-American, suggesting that they had not been able to take the situation into account.

However also as predicted, there was a significant difference for cognitively busy participants who saw an Asian-American actor, suggesting these participants did take the situation into account when making their attributions. When the situation was plausible, participants rated the actor's disposition as less angry at 5.69 versus 7.23 when the situation was an implausible. Ratings of the situation demonstrated a trend towards significance with a  $p < .10$ . When the situation was plausible, participants rated the anger provocation

Table 1. Results

Means and Pairwise Comparisons

African-American Actor Groups			
Cognitive Task #	Question Plausibility ##	Rating of Actor ###	Rating of Situation ####
Cognitively Busy	Situation was Plausible	7.31 a--	4.31 ab--
	Situation was Not Plausible	7.33 a--	3.71 a-c-
Not Cognitively Busy	Situation was Plausible	6.00 -bc	6.06 ---d
	Situation was Not Plausible	7.00 a-c	2.64 --c-
Asian-American Actor Groups			
Cognitive Task	Question Plausibility	Rating of Actor	Rating of Situation
Cognitively Busy	Situation was Plausible	5.69 -b-	4.63 ab-d*
	Situation was Not Plausible	7.23 a--	3.23 a-c-*
Not Cognitively Busy	Situation was Plausible	6.87 a-c	5.40 -b-d
	Situation was Not Plausible	5.94 -bc	3.56 a-c-

# = Cognitive Task was manipulated by having participants count hesitations in the question and answer. The two Cognitively Busy groups should not differ when participants are following a dispositional-first process. If they do differ, a situational-first process is being followed.

## = Question Plausibility was manipulated by changing the questions preceding the angry responses. Situation was Plausible means that the questions were perceived by participants to be anger provoking in a pilot study.

### = Rating of Actor was the participant's rating of the dispositional anger of the actor. Ratings ranged from 0, very little anger to 10, a lot of anger. Means with the same subscript did not differ significantly, ( $p < .05$ ).

#### = Rating of the Situation was the participant's rating of the degree that the situation was considered to be anger provoking with 0 meaning not very anger provoking and 10 meaning very anger provoking.

\* = Means that both have a '\*' demonstrate a trend towards differing with a  $p < .10$ .

### Rating of the Actor and the Question

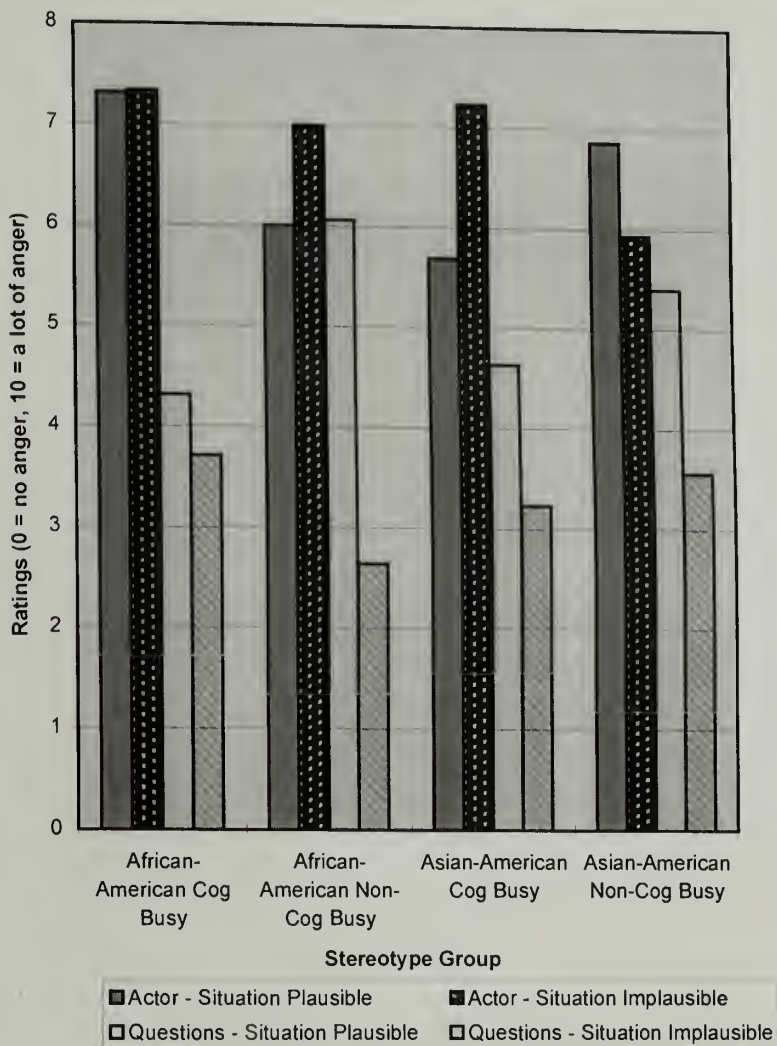


Figure 3. Results



of the question at 4.63, while when it was not plausible their ratings dropped 1.4 to 3.23.

A second theoretically interesting type of pairwise comparison involves whether non-cognitively busy participants rated the actor's disposition or the situation in a similar manner as their cognitively busy counterparts. Cognitively busy participants are viewed as being frozen in the first stage of the attribution process, while non-cognitively busy participants are seen as being in the second stage. If the participants rate the actor differently when they are not cognitively loaded, this difference is seen as a correction for information that was not used when the participants were cognitively loaded (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988).

For participants who saw an African-American actor, the dispositional-first correction for the situation was replicated on both scales for the situation plausible groups. Non-cognitively busy participants rated the actor as less angry than the cognitively busy participants with a mean of 6.00 versus 7.33, and they rated the questions as more anger provoking with a mean of 6.06 versus 3.71. It appears participants who were not cognitively busy were able to take the situation into account.

For participants who saw an Asian-American actor, what appears to be a dispositional correction was found for both situation plausible and implausible groups. When the situation was plausible, cognitively busy participants rated the actor as less angry with a mean of 5.69 versus the non-cognitive busy participants who made a correction and gave a higher average rating of 6.87. When the situation was not plausible the pattern was the opposite, where participants who were cognitively busy rated the actor as more angry with a mean of 7.23 while non-cognitively busy participants only rated the actor at 5.94.

The other Asian-American actor mean pairs did differ somewhat, although the difference was not significant due to a large standard deviation. While corrections for the actor's disposition were expected in these mean pairs, the exact direction was not specified. Some possible interpretations of these findings are discussed in the next section.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 General

The basic model underlying this experiment was that congruency between expectations and observed behavior can determine whether people will follow a situational-first or dispositional-first attributional process. A quick look at the results confirms that the pattern of responses was markedly different for each stereotype condition. When people observe a person behaving in a way that is congruent with their expectations, a dispositional-first process is followed where the behavior is first assumed to reflect the actor's disposition. The alternative mode of attributional processing is where the behavior contradicts the observer's expectations, and the observer follows a situational-first attribution process where the situation is relatively automatically considered as a plausible cause of the behavior.

The African-American actor groups were used to demonstrate the dispositional-first attributional process.

These groups theoretically experienced little discrepancy between expectations and observed behavior, and rated the actor as equally dispositionally angry when cognitively

busy regardless of the situation. They only corrected for the situation when they had the cognitive resources available.

The Asian-American groups were used to demonstrate the situational-first process. They theoretically experienced a much greater discrepancy between expectations and observed behavior. The cognitively busy groups responded as predicted by making different evaluations of the actor, and to a lesser extent of the situation. In general, this finding implies that when a behavior is incongruent with our expectations, we are reluctant to re-evaluate our beliefs concerning the person who committed the behavior and instead will first scrutinize the situation for a possible explanation.

#### 4.2 Previous Attribution Process Research

For the purposes of comparison to previous research on the nature of attributional processes, the African-American condition replicated the dispositional-first process outlined by Gilbert, Pelham and Krull (1988). This is encouraging in that it suggests that these paradigms are addressing the same underlying phenomenon.

Another replication was of Krull's (1993) results, while at the same time his findings were also extended. In

his original study, he only used conditions where the situational was a plausible cause of the behavior. This study also included conditions where the situation was not a plausible cause to answer the question whether the situation was assumed as the cause, or if cognitively loaded participants were actually assessing the situation as a cause. The difference between the Asian-American, cognitively busy participants that read anger provoking or neutral questions suggests that in a situational-first process, the situation is assessed, not assumed as the probable cause.

Thus, this model can be superficially interpreted as implying that the dispositional-first and situational-first processes are mirror images of one another. However, there is one key difference: A dispositional-first attribution means that the degree of attribution will be a function of the degree of the behavior displayed due to the fact that when we ignore the situation, the disposition can practically always be a plausible explanation. Yet, given the initial behavior, the situation cannot always be a plausible explanation. Thus a situation-first process results in a situational attribution only to the extent that the situation is a plausible cause. Since the

situation is not always a plausible cause, the processes are similar, but not identical.

#### 4.3 General Attribution Research

Interpreting the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979) and intergroup attribution research (Hewstone, 1990) findings with this revised model presents us with a somewhat more complex picture. It is now necessary to divide this body of research into two types. The first case would be where group membership of an actor is not known initially. In this case, the end result, in-group enhancing and out-group derogating attributions, would be the result of a motivated correction in accord with Gilbert, Pelham and Krull's (1988) original theory.

However, in the second case, when the group membership of the actor is known beforehand, the model proposed here would suggest that a stereotype would be activated, and the actor's behavior is then compared to the stereotype. From this point on, which attribution process is followed would be a function of whether or not the behavior was congruent with the stereotype. When the stereotype is congruent with the observed behavior, a dispositional-first bias would be activated. However, when the stereotype was incongruent, a situational-first bias would be activated. Motivation

could still play a role in the correction stages, although the effect of different groups and related stereotypes is likely not as clear-cut as previously thought.

#### 4.4 Future Directions

One central issue left unexamined is the nature of a dispositional correction. Here, a dispositional correction has been described as a correction where the observer considers in more depth what they know of the actor. Future research could confirm this in one of two ways. First, by varying the amount of information the participant has concerning the actor and thus varying the sophistication of the observer's expectations. The second method could remain in the realm of stereotyping and comparing observers with rigid superficial stereotypes versus observers with a rich variety of sub-stereotypes.

A second issue is that while the situation and the disposition are reconsidered, no model takes into account the possibility of the behavior itself being reconsidered.

Another third that could be expanded on in the future involves the issue of motivation. In this study, a cognitive load task was used that was intentionally ambiguous to increase the plausibility of the cover story.

A cognitive load task that was less ambiguous would allow

a more detailed evaluation of whether or not cognitively loaded participants who were exposed to an actor whose behavior was incongruent with the observer's expectation responded by actually completing the first stage then allocating more resources to the attribution process while allowing their performance on the cognitive load task to suffer. The motivation hypothesis is one main alternative hypothesis to the one presented in this paper. However, the motivation hypothesis suffers from the fact that it does not predict the observed corrections found in the Asian-American, non-cognitively busy conditions, and more specifically does not predict that these corrections would be dispositional in nature. Still, an addition of a more concrete cognitive load task would help resolve this dilemma.

A final issue that could be explored more in future research is related to the concept of familiarity. One potential confound of the current research is that it is possible that participants were more familiar with African-Americans and related stereotypes than they were with Asian-Americans. Thus, it would not be a congruency or incongruency between expectations and behavior that triggered the observed processes, but rather the lack of



familiarity with Asian-Americans that resulted in the initial apparent scrutiny of situational information. Since familiarity of stereotypes is likely to always be a real life confound, it would be necessary to create behavioral expectations for a target person that would be equally familiar to rule out this possibility. It is important to note, however, that this alternative possibility would still imply that our expectations are based on stereotypes related to race. Otherwise participants would have been equally unfamiliar with all three actors used in this study.

#### 4.5 Conclusions

This research demonstrated that, in the process of person perception, stereotypes and expectations can determine whether we first attend to the situation or not when we are deciding why a person is acting a particular way. People who are involved in many tasks at once would be especially susceptible to fail to correct their initial expectations of another person's behavior by not having the cognitive resources to attend to situational constraints on the other individual.

Unfortunately, this suggests decision makers who are overtaxed and are confronted with someone they expect to

behave in a negative fashion will frequently neglect situational information in their rush to make a decision. When this person fails, he or she will be perceived as a failure, and an alternative, situational explanation will not be sought out. Likewise, people who are expected to succeed will be seen as a success even if most people would have succeeded in that situation. Frequently, only when people who are expected to fail manage to succeed, or those who are expected to succeed somehow fail, will most perceivers attend to the possible situational causes. Since often in real life the situation will be ambiguous enough that a possible cause for the unexpected success or failure can be found, the research presented here implies yet another way stereotypes can be reinforced and maintained in everyday life.

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