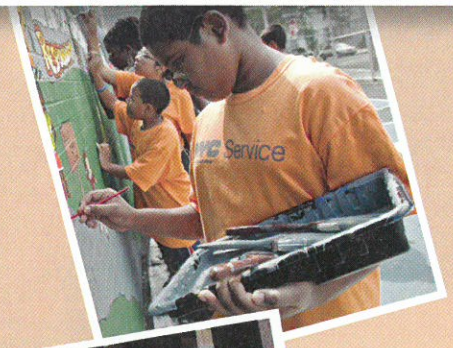
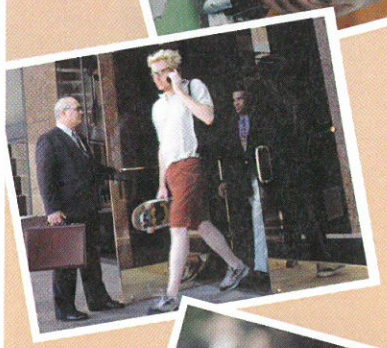
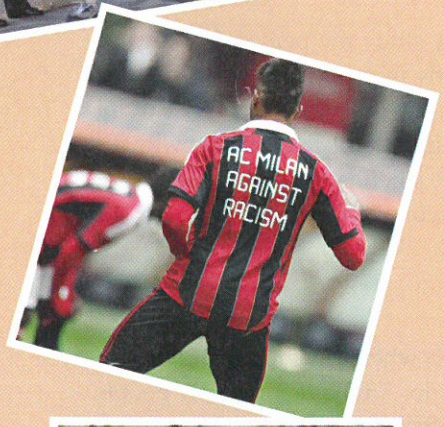
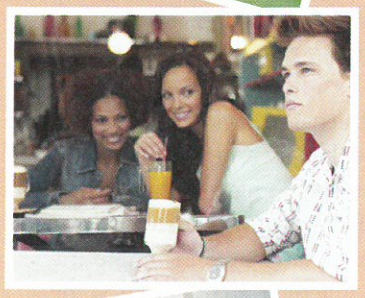
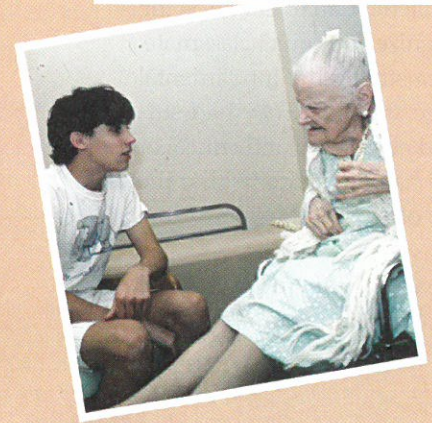
Unit XIV











Social Psychology

Modules

Dirk Willems faced a moment of decision in 1569. Threatened with torture and death as a member of a persecuted religious minority, he escaped from his Asperen, Holland, prison and fled across an ice-covered pond. His stronger and heavier jailer pursued him but fell through the ice and, unable to climb out, pled for help.

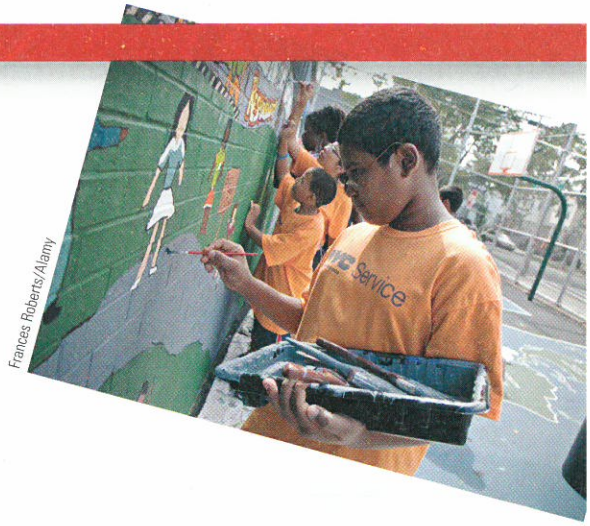
With his freedom in front of him, Willems acted with ultimate selflessness. He turned back and rescued his pursuer, who, under orders, took him back to captivity. A few weeks later Willems was condemned to be "executed with fire, until death ensues." For his martyrdom, present-day Asperen has named a street in honor of its folk hero (Toews, 2004).

What drives people to feel contempt for religious minorities such as Dirk Willems, and to act so spitefully? And what motivated the selflessness of Willems' response, and of so many who have died trying to save others? Indeed, what motivates any of us when we volunteer kindness and generosity toward others?

As such examples demonstrate, we are social animals. We may assume the best or the worst in others. We may approach them with closed fists or open arms. But as the novelist Herman Melville remarked, "We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads." *Social psychologists* explore these connections by scientifically studying how we *think about, influence,* and *relate* to one another.

Module 74

Attribution, Attitudes, and Actions



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Module Learning Objectives

74-1 Identify what social psychologists study, and discuss how we tend to explain others' behavior and our own.

74-2 Explain whether what we think affects what we do, and whether what we do affects what we think.

74-1 What do social psychologists study? How do we tend to explain others' behavior and our own?

Personality psychologists (Unit X) focus on the person. They study the personal traits and dynamics that explain why *different people* may act differently *in a given situation,* such as the one Willems faced. (Would you have helped the jailer out of the icy water?) **Social psychologists** focus on the situation. They study the social influences that explain why *the same person* will act differently in *different situations*. Might the jailer have acted differently—opting not to march Willems back to jail—under differing circumstances?

social psychology the scientific study of how we think about, influence, and relate to one another.

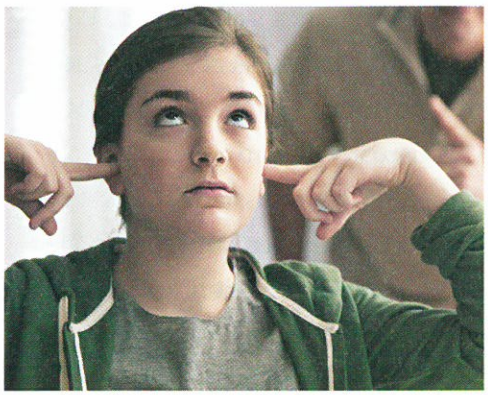
attribution theory the theory that we explain someone's behavior by crediting either the situation or the person's disposition.

fundamental attribution error the tendency for observers, when analyzing others' behavior, to underestimate the impact of the situation and to overestimate the impact of personal disposition.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Our social behavior arises from our social cognition. Especially when the unexpected occurs, we want to understand and explain why people act as they do. After studying how people explain others' behavior, Fritz Heider (1958) proposed an **attribution theory:** We can attribute the behavior to the person's stable, enduring traits (a *dispositional attribution*). Or we can attribute it to the situation (a *situational attribution*).

For example, in class, we notice that Juliette seldom talks. At the game, Jack talks nonstop. That must be the sort of people they are, we decide. Juliette must be shy and Jack outgoing. Such attributions—to their dispositions—can be valid, because people do have enduring personality traits. But sometimes we fall prey to the **fundamental attribution error** (Ross, 1977): We overestimate the influence of personality and underestimate the influence of situations. In class, Jack may be as quiet as Juliette. Catch Juliette as the lead in the high school musical and you may hardly recognize your quiet classmate.



David Napolitan and George Goethals (1979) demonstrated the fundamental attribution error in an experiment with Williams College students. They had students talk, one at a time, with a young woman who acted either cold and critical or warm and friendly. Before the talks, the researchers told half the students that the woman's behavior would be spontaneous. They told the other half the truth—that they had instructed her to *act* friendly (or unfriendly).

Did hearing the truth affect students' impressions of the woman? Not at all! If the woman acted friendly, both groups decided she really was a warm person. If

she acted unfriendly, both decided she really was a cold person. They attributed her behavior to her personal disposition *even when told that her behavior was situational*—that she was merely acting that way for the purposes of the experiment.

The fundamental attribution error appears more often in some cultures than in others. Individualist Westerners more often attribute behavior to people's personal traits. People in East Asian cultures are somewhat more sensitive to the power of the situation (Heine & Ruby, 2010; Kitayama et al., 2009). This difference has appeared in experiments that asked people to view scenes, such as a big fish swimming. Americans focused more on the individual fish, and Japanese people more on the whole scene (Chua et al., 2005; Nisbett, 2003).

We all commit the fundamental attribution error. Consider: Is your AP® psychology teacher shy or outgoing? If you answer "outgoing," remember that you know your teacher from one situation—the classroom, which demands outgoing behavior. Your teacher (who observes his or her own behavior not only in the classroom, but also with family, in meetings, when traveling) might say, "Me, outgoing? It all depends on the situation. In class or with good friends, yes, I'm outgoing. But at professional meetings, I'm really rather shy." Outside their assigned roles, teachers seem less teacherly, presidents less presidential, lawyers less legalistic.

When we explain *our own* behavior, we are sensitive to how our behavior changes with the situation (Idson & Mischel, 2001). After behaving badly, for example, we recognize how the situation affected our actions (recall the *self-serving bias* discussed in Module 59). What about our own intentional and admirable actions? Those we attribute not to situations but to our own good reasons (Malle, 2006; Malle et al., 2007). We also are sensitive to the power of the situation when we explain the behavior of people we know well and have seen in different contexts. We are most likely to commit the fundamental attribution error when a stranger acts badly. Having only seen that red-faced fan screaming at the referee in the heat of competition, we may assume he is a bad person. But outside the stadium, he may be a good neighbor and a great parent.

Researchers have reversed the perspectives of actor and observer. They filmed two people interacting, with a camera behind each person. Then they showed each person a replay—filmed from the other person's perspective. This reversed their attributions of the behaviors (Lassiter & Irvine, 1986; Storms, 1973). Seeing things from the actor's perspective, the observers better appreciated the situation. (As we act, our eyes look outward; we see others' faces, not our own.) Taking the observer's point of view, the actors became more aware of their own personal style.

Reflecting on our past selves of 5 or 10 years ago also switches our perspective. Our present self adopts the observer's perspective and attributes our past behavior mostly to our traits (Pronin & Ross, 2006). In another 5 or 10 years, your today's self may seem like another person.

The way we explain others' actions, attributing them to the person or the situation, can have important real-life effects (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Fletcher et al., 1990). A person must decide whether to interpret another's friendliness as genuine, or motivated by self-interest (she just needs a ride). A jury must decide whether a shooting was malicious or in self-defense. A voter must decide whether a candidate's promises will be kept or forgotten. A partner must decide whether a loved one's tart-tongued remark reflects a bad day or a mean disposition.

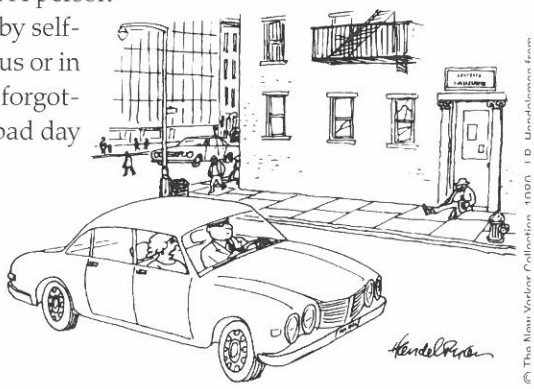
Finally, consider the social and economic effects of attribution. How do we explain poverty or unemployment? In Britain, India, Australia, and the United States political conservatives tend to place the blame on the personal dispositions of the poor and unemployed: "People generally get what they deserve. Those who don't work are freeloaders. Those who take initiative can still get ahead" (Furnham, 1982; Pandey et al., 1982; Wagstaff, 1982; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Political liberals (and social scientists) are more likely to blame past and present situations: "If you or I

AP® Exam Tip

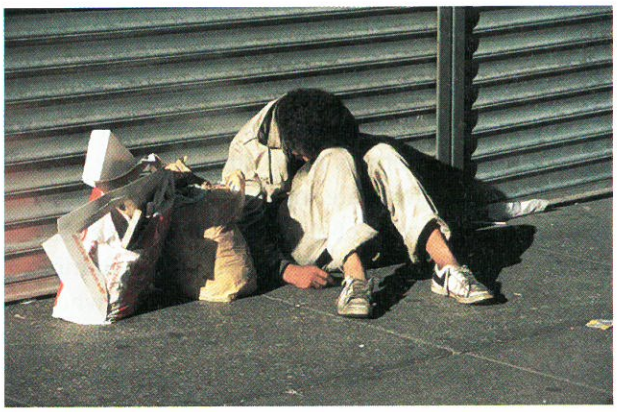
Many students have not heard of the fundamental attribution error before taking a course in psychology. This concept often shows up on the AP® exam, so be sure you understand this well.

FYI

Some 7 in 10 college women report having experienced a man misattributing her friendliness as a sexual come-on (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007).



"Otis, shout at that man to pull himself together."


Lee Snider/The Image Works

An attribution question Whether we attribute poverty and homelessness to social circumstances or to personal dispositions affects and reflects our political views.

had to live with the same poor education, lack of opportunity, and discrimination, would we be any better off?" To understand and prevent terrorism, they say, consider the situations that breed terrorists. Better to drain the swamps than swat the mosquitoes.

The point to remember: Our attributions—to a person's disposition or to the situation—have real consequences.

Attitudes and Actions

74-2 Does what we think affect what we do, or does what we do affect what we think?

Attitudes are feelings, often influenced by our beliefs, that predispose our reactions to objects, people, and events. If we *believe* someone is threatening us, we may *feel* fear and anger toward the person and *act* defensively. The traffic between our attitudes and our actions is two-way. Our attitudes affect our actions. And our actions affect our attitudes.

Attitudes Affect Actions

Consider the climate-change debate. On one side are climate-change activists: "Almost all climate scientists are of one mind about the threat of global warming," reports *Science* magazine (Kerr, 2009). "It's real, it's dangerous, and the world needs to take action immediately." On the other side are climate-change deniers: The number of Americans who told Gallup pollsters that global warming is "generally exaggerated" increased from 30 percent in 2006 to 48 percent in 2010, and then dropped to 42 percent in 2012 (Saad, 2013).

Knowing that public attitudes affect public policies, activists on both sides are aiming to persuade. Persuasion efforts generally take two forms:

- **Peripheral route persuasion** doesn't engage systematic thinking, but does produce fast results as people respond to incidental cues (such as endorsements by respected people) and make snap judgments. A perfume ad may lure us with images of beautiful or famous people in love.
- **Central route persuasion** offers evidence and arguments that aim to trigger favorable thoughts. It occurs mostly when people are naturally analytical or involved in the issue. Environmental advocates may show us evidence of rising temperatures, melting glaciers, rising seas, and northward shifts in vegetation and animal life. Because it is more thoughtful and less superficial, it is more durable and more likely to influence behavior.

Those who attempt to persuade us are trying to influence our behavior by changing our attitudes. But other factors, including the situation, also influence behavior. Strong social pressures, for example, can weaken the attitude-behavior connection (Wallace et al., 2005).

attitude feelings, often influenced by our beliefs, that predispose us to respond in a particular way to objects, people, and events.

peripheral route persuasion occurs when people are influenced by incidental cues, such as a speaker's attractiveness.

central route persuasion occurs when interested people focus on the arguments and respond with favorable thoughts.