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.

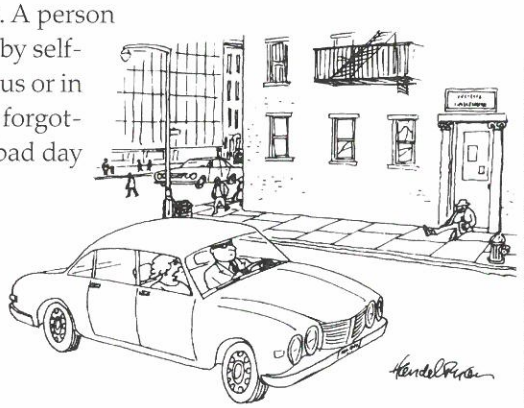
Finally, consider the social and economic effects of attribution. How do we explain poverty or unemployment? In Britain, India, Australia, and the United States political conservatives tend to place the blame on the personal dispositions of the poor and unemployed: "People generally get what they deserve. 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.

In roll-call votes, politicians will sometimes vote what their supporters demand, despite privately disagreeing with those demands (Nagourney, 2002). In such cases, external pressure overrides the attitude-behavior link.

Attitudes are especially likely to affect behavior when external influences are minimal, and when the attitude is stable, specific to the behavior, and easily recalled (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). One experiment used vivid, easily recalled information to persuade people that sustained tanning put them at risk for future skin cancer. One month later, 72 percent of the participants, and only 16 percent of those in a waitlist control group, had lighter skin (McClendon & Prentice-Dunn, 2001). Persuasion changed attitudes, which changed behavior.

Actions Affect Attitudes

Now consider a more surprising principle: Not only will people stand up for what they believe, they also will believe more strongly in what they have stood up for. Many streams of evidence confirm that *attitudes follow behavior* (**FIGURE 74.1**).

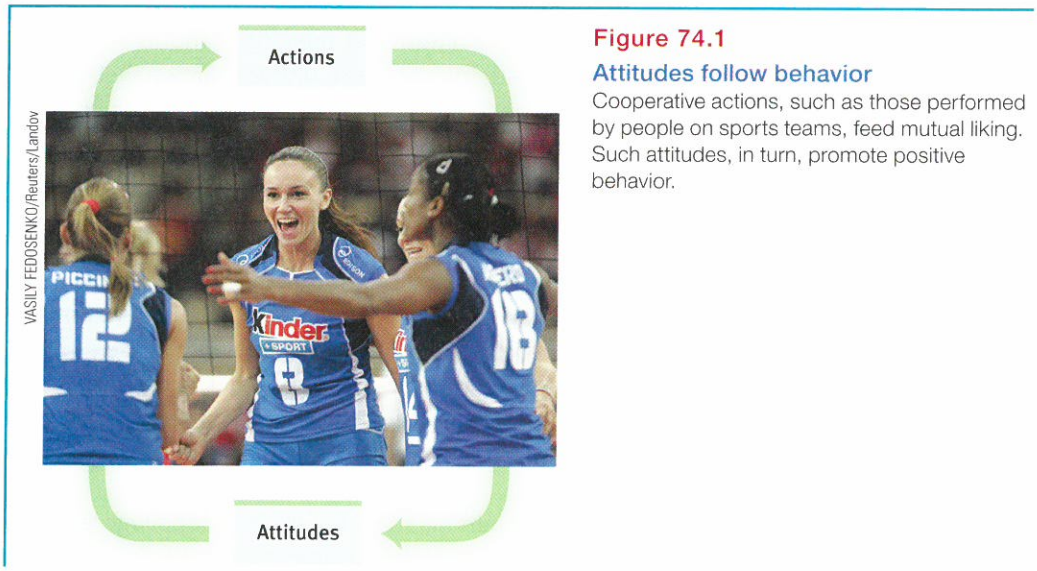


Figure 74.1
Attitudes follow behavior
Cooperative actions, such as those performed by people on sports teams, feed mutual liking. Such attitudes, in turn, promote positive behavior.

THE FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR PHENOMENON

How would you react if someone induced you to act against your beliefs? In many cases, people adjust their attitudes. During the Korean war, many U.S. prisoners of war were held in war camps run by Chinese communists. Without using brutality, the captors secured the prisoners' collaboration in various activities. Some merely ran errands or accepted favors. Others made radio appeals and false confessions. Still others informed on other prisoners and divulged military information. When the war ended, 21 prisoners chose to stay with the communists. More returned home "brainwashed"—convinced that communism was a good thing for Asia.

How did the Chinese captors achieve these amazing results? A key ingredient was their effective use of the **foot-in-the-door phenomenon:** They knew that people who agreed to a small request would find it easier to comply later with a larger one. The Chinese began with harmless requests, such as copying a trivial statement, but gradually escalated their demands (Schein, 1956). The next statement to be copied might list flaws of capitalism. Then, to gain privileges, the prisoners participated in group discussions, wrote self-criticisms, or uttered public confessions. After doing so, they often adjusted their beliefs to be more consistent with their public acts. The point is simple: To get people to agree to something big, start small and build (Cialdini, 1993). A trivial act makes the next act easier. Succumb to a temptation, and you will find the next temptation harder to resist.

foot-in-the-door phenomenon the tendency for people who have first agreed to a small request to comply later with a larger request.

In dozens of experiments, researchers have coaxed people into acting against their attitudes or violating their moral standards, with the same result: Doing becomes believing. After giving in to a request to harm an innocent victim—by making nasty comments or delivering electric shocks—people begin to disparage their victim. After speaking or writing on behalf of a position they have qualms about, they begin to believe their own words.

Fortunately, the attitudes-follow-behavior principle works with good deeds as well. The foot-in-the-door tactic has helped boost charitable contributions, blood donations, and product sales. In one classic experiment, researchers posing as safe-driving volunteers asked Californians to permit the installation of a large, poorly lettered "Drive Carefully" sign in their front yards. Only 17 percent consented. They approached other home owners with a small request first: Would they display a 3-inch-high "Be a Safe Driver" sign? Nearly all readily agreed. When reapproached two weeks later to allow the large, ugly sign in their front yards, 76 percent consented (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). To secure a big commitment, it often pays to put your foot in the door: Start small and build.

Racial attitudes likewise follow behavior. In the years immediately following the introduction of school desegregation in the United States and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, White Americans expressed diminishing racial prejudice. And as Americans in different regions came to act more alike—thanks to more uniform national standards against discrimination—they began to think more alike. Experiments confirm the observation: Moral action strengthens moral convictions.

ROLE PLAYING AFFECTS ATTITUDES

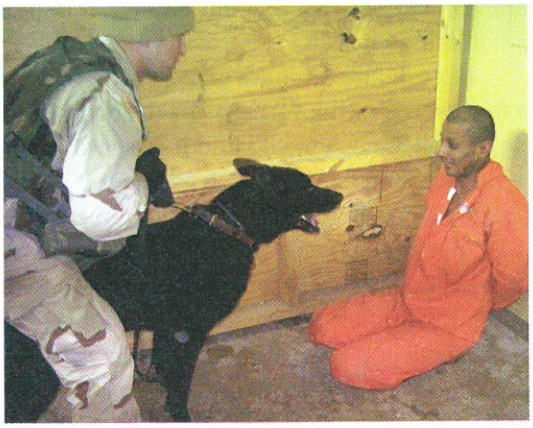
"Fake it until you make it."
-Alcoholics Anonymous saying

When you adopt a new **role**—when you leave middle school and start high school, become a college student, or begin a new job—you strive to follow the social prescriptions. At first, your behaviors may feel phony, because you are *acting* a role. Soldiers may at first feel they are playing war games. Newlyweds may feel they are "playing house." Before long, however, what began as playacting in the theater of life becomes you. Researchers have confirmed this effect by assessing people's attitudes before and after they adopt a new role, sometimes in laboratory situations, sometimes in everyday situations, such as before and after taking a job.

role a set of expectations (norms) about a social position, defining how those in the position ought to behave.

Role playing morphed into real life in one famous study in which male college students volunteered to spend time in a simulated prison. Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo (1972) randomly assigned some volunteers to be guards. He gave them uniforms, clubs, and whistles and instructed them to enforce certain rules. Others became prisoners, locked in barren cells and forced to wear humiliating outfits. For a day or two, the volunteers self-consciously "played" their roles. Then the simulation became real—too real. Most guards developed disparaging attitudes, and some devised cruel and degrading routines. One by one, the prisoners broke down, rebelled, or became passively resigned. After only six days, Zimbardo called off the study.

Philip G. Zimbardo, Inc.



AP Photo

The power of the situation In his 1972 Stanford Prison simulation, Philip Zimbardo created a toxic situation (left). Those assigned to the guard role soon degraded the prisoners. In real life in 2004, some U.S. military guards tormented Iraqi prisoners at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison (right). To Zimbardo (2004, 2007), it was a bad barrel rather than a few bad apples that led to the Abu Ghraib atrocities: "When ordinary people are put in a novel, evil place, such as most prisons, Situations Win, People Lose."

Role playing can train torturers (Staub, 1989). In the early 1970s, the Greek military government eased men into their roles. First, a trainee stood guard outside an interrogation cell. After this "foot in the door" step, he stood guard inside. Only then was he ready to become actively involved in the questioning and torture. What we do, we gradually become.

Yet people differ. In Zimbardo's Stanford Prison simulation and in other atrocity-producing situations, some people have succumbed to the situation and others have not (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007; Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Mastroianni & Reed, 2006; Zimbardo, 2007). Person and situation interact. Much as water dissolves salt but not sand, so toxic situations corrupt some people but not others (Johnson, 2007).

Regarding U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's commitment to the Vietnam war: "A president who justifies his actions only to the public might be induced to change them. A president who has justified his actions to himself, believing that he has the truth, becomes impervious to self-correction." -Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, 2007

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: RELIEF FROM TENSION

So far we have seen that actions can affect attitudes, sometimes turning prisoners into collaborators, doubters into believers, and compliant guards into abusers. But why? One explanation is that when we become aware that our attitudes and actions don't coincide, we experience tension, or *cognitive dissonance*. To relieve such tension, according to Leon Festinger's (1957) **cognitive dissonance theory,** we often bring our attitudes into line with our actions.

cognitive dissonance theory the theory that we act to reduce the discomfort (dissonance) we feel when two of our thoughts (cognitions) are inconsistent. For example, when we become aware that our attitudes and our actions clash, we can reduce the resulting dissonance by changing our attitudes.

Dozens of experiments have explored this cognitive dissonance phenomenon. Many have made people feel responsible for behavior that clashed with their attitudes and had foreseeable consequences. In one of these experiments, you might agree for a measly $2 to help a researcher by writing an essay that supports something you don't believe in (perhaps a school vending machine tax). Feeling responsible for the statements (which are inconsistent with your attitudes), you would probably feel dissonance, especially if you thought an administrator would be reading your essay. To reduce the uncomfortable tension you might start believing your phony words. At such times, it's as if we rationalize, "If I chose to do it (or say it), I must believe in it." The less coerced and more responsible we feel for a troubling act, the more dissonance we feel. The more dissonance we feel, the more motivated we are to find consistency, such as changing our attitudes to help justify the act.

The pressure to reduce dissonance helps explain the evolution of American attitudes toward the U.S. invasion of Iraq. When the war began, the stated reason for the invasion was the presumed threat of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Would the war be justified if Iraq did not have WMD? Only 38 percent of Americans surveyed said it would be (Gallup, 2003). Nearly 80 percent believed such weapons would be found (Duffy, 2003; Newport et al., 2003). When no WMD were found, many Americans felt dissonance, which was heightened by their awareness of the war's financial and human costs, by scenes of chaos in Iraq, and by inflamed anti-American and pro-terrorist sentiments in some parts of the world.

To reduce dissonance, some people revised their memories of the war's rationale. The invasion then became a movement to liberate an oppressed people and promote democracy in the Middle East. Before long, 58 percent of Americans—a majority—said they supported the war even if no WMD were found (Gallup, 2003).

The attitudes-follow-behavior principle has a heartening implication: We cannot directly control all our feelings, but we can influence them by altering our behavior. (Recall from Module 42 the emotional effects of facial expressions and of body postures.) If we are down in the dumps, we can do as cognitive-behavioral therapists advise and talk in more positive, self-accepting ways with fewer self-put-downs. If we are unloving, we can become more loving by behaving as if we were so—by doing thoughtful things, expressing affection, giving affirmation. That helps explain why teens' doing volunteer work promotes a compassionate identity. "Assume a virtue, if you have it not," says Hamlet to his mother. "For use can almost change the stamp of nature." Pretense can become reality. Conduct sculpts character. What we do we become.

The point to remember: Cruel acts shape the self. But so do acts of good will. Act as though you like someone, and you soon may. Changing our behavior can change how we think about others and how we feel about ourselves.

"Sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers. . . . If we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves, we must . . . go through the outward movements of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate." -William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1890

Before You Move On

▶ ASK YOURSELF

Do you have an attitude or tendency you would like to change? Using the attitudes-follow-behavior principle, how might you go about changing that attitude?

▶ TEST YOURSELF

Driving to school one snowy day, Marco narrowly misses a car that slides through a red light. "Slow down! What a terrible driver," he thinks to himself. Moments later, Marco himself slips through an intersection and yelps, "Wow! These roads are awful. The city plows need to get out here." What social psychology principle has Marco just demonstrated? Explain.

Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.

Module 74 Review

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

- *Social psychologists* focus on how we think about, influence, and relate to one another. They study the social influences that explain why the same person will act differently in different situations.
- When explaining others' behavior, we may commit the *fundamental attribution error* (underestimating the influence of the situation and overestimating the effects of personality). When explaining our own behavior, we more readily attribute it to the influence of the situation.

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 us to respond in certain ways.
- *Peripheral route persuasion* uses incidental cues (such as celebrity endorsement) to try to produce fast but relatively thoughtless changes in attitudes.
- *Central route persuasion* offers evidence and arguments to trigger thoughtful responses.
- When other influences are minimal, attitudes that are stable, specific, and easily recalled can affect our actions.
- Actions can modify attitudes, as in the *foot-in-the-door phenomenon* (complying with a large request after having agreed to a small request) and role playing (acting a social part by following guidelines for expected behavior).
- When our attitudes don't fit with our actions, *cognitive dissonance theory* suggests that we will reduce tension by changing our attitudes to match our actions.