Causal Attributions

Prejudice is also closely connected to the way that ingroup and outgroup members explain each other's behavior. These explanations, known in psychology as "causal attributions," are both a symptom and source of prejudice. If, for example, a single mother's homelessness is attributed to dispositional factors such as personal laziness, poor character, or lack of ability, prejudice toward single mothers is likely to persist. In contrast, if her homelessness is attributed to situational factors such as job layoffs or domestic partner violence, prejudice toward single mothers may not come into play or may even be reduced. The problem, when it comes to prejudice, is that people often make uncharitable attributions for the behavior of outgroup members. They do this in at least three ways:

1. Just-world attributions in an unjust world. In many situations, causal attributions implicitly follow a "just world" ideology that assumes people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner, 1980; Montada & Lerner, 1998). For example, people who hold just-world beliefs are more likely than others to blame poor people for being impoverished and, to some extent, are more likely to blame women for being battered or raped (Cowan & Curtis, 1994; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Schuller, Smith, & Olson, 1994). The difficulty with such attributions is that the world is not always just; people often find themselves in unfair circumstances, whether by birth, happenstance, or other factors beyond their control. In such cases, a just-world ideology downplays the role of situational factors and says, in essence, that the problem of social injustice lies not in society but in the victims of prejudice.

2. The fundamental attribution error. In addition to just-world beliefs, people have a more general tendency to attribute behavior to dispositional causes. Even when behaviors are undeniably caused by situational factors, people will sometimes favor dispositional explanations -- a misjudgment known as the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977). For example, in one of the earliest studies published on this topic, participants were presented with an essay written by someone who was either explicitly forced to take a particular position or someone who had free choice in selecting a position (Jones & Harris, 1967). Even when participants were expressly told that the essay's author was forced to take a certain position, they tended to believe that the author truly held that position. In the realm of prejudice, Elliot Aronson, Timothy Wilson, and Robin Akert (2002, p. 481) offer a textbook illustration of the fundamental attribution error in action:

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When the Jews were first forced to flee their homeland during the third Diaspora, some 2,500 years ago, they were not allowed to own land or become artisans in the new regions in which they settled. Needing a livelihood, some took to lending money -- one of the few professions to which they were allowed easy access. Although this choice of occupation was an accidental byproduct of restrictive laws, it led to a dispositional attribution about Jews: that they were interested only in dealing with money and not in honest labor, like farming....This dispositional stereotype contributed greatly to the barbarous consequences of anti-Semitism in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s and has persisted even in the face of clear, disconfirming evidence such as that produced by the birth of the state of Israel, where Jews tilled the soil and made the desert bloom.

3. The ultimate attribution error. Taking the fundamental attribution error one step further, Thomas Pettigrew (1979) suggested that an "ultimate attribution error" occurs when ingroup members (1) attribute negative outgroup behavior to dispositional causes (more than they would for identical ingroup behavior), and (2) attribute positive outgroup behavior to one or more of the following causes: (a) a fluke or exceptional case, (b) luck or special advantage, (c) high motivation and effort, and (d) situational factors. This attributional double standard makes it virtually impossible for outgroup members to break free of prejudice against them, because their positive actions are explained away while their failures and shortcomings are used against them. Although the research record is somewhat mixed, studies generally support Pettigrew's analysis (Hewstone, 1990). One study found, for example, that White students were more likely to interpret a shove as violent -- and more likely to explain it dispositionally -- when the shove came from a Black person than a White person (Duncan, 1976). Another study found that Hindu participants were more likely to make dispositional attributions for negative behaviors than positive behaviors when the actor was Muslim, but showed the opposite pattern when the actor was Hindu (Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). And a review of 58 different experiments found that on traditionally masculine tasks, male successes were more likely than female successes to be attributed to ability, whereas male failures were more likely than female failures to be attributed to bad luck or lack of effort (Swim & Sanna, 1996).