

This Week's Citation Classic™

CC/NUMBER 23
JUNE 4, 1979

Jones E E & Davis K E. From acts to dispositions: the attribution process in person Perception. *Advances in experimental social psychology*. (L. Berkowitz, ed.) New York: Academic Press, 1965. Vol. II, p. 219-266. (Duke University, Durham, NC)

A theory is proposed to account for an observer's attribution of personal dispositions upon the perception of an act. Informative ('correspondent') dispositions will be inferred to the extent that there are few distinctive reasons for the act and these reasons have low 'prior probability' [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*™ (SSC™) indicate that this paper has been cited over 295 times since 1965.]

Edward E. Jones
Department of Psychology
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08540

January 17, 1978

"This integrative theoretical paper originated in a very simple notion I had used in explaining to undergraduates how we perceive and make inferences about other people: strong and confident dispositional inferences are drawn about a person when we see him or her act under conditions of high choice. To me this was a relatively self-evident proposition that nevertheless had didactic value precisely because students would readily recognize its common sense validity.

"When I was invited to prepare a paper for *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, I thought I would try to formalize this notion and thus provide a framework for discussing my own and others' person perception research. After several discussions with Keith Davis, a former student whom I much admired, a theory of 'correspondent inference' emerged that was considerably more complicated than its

animating notion. Although the theory seemed to flow naturally from a careful consideration of the conditions and consequences of perceived choice, I recall being quite nervous about the resulting essay. At times I wondered whether we had concealed a banal truth in some new and pretentious jargon. At other times I began to wonder whether we had merely re-invented information theory and shown its utility in the person perception context. When I discussed the ideas with my immediate colleagues, their reactions were politely supportive, but I remained uncertain of the value and clarity of our formulation.

"In order to understand why the original paper has been so often cited, it is necessary to consider the *Zeitgeist* in the middle and late 1960s. A number of independent efforts were beginning to crystallize into an 'attributional approach' to interpersonal relations. Our paper was one of the first systematic attempts at an attribution theory. It was not particularly acclaimed or widely cited soon after its publication, but as the attribution movement gathered influence in the late 1960s, the paper was resurrected and became a standard reference in social psychology textbooks.

"It is not clear to me how much the paper was a stimulus for the development of today's omnipresent attributional perspective in social psychology and how much it was merely a reference swept up in the enthusiasm generated by the work of others such as Fritz Heider and Harold Kelley.² I like to believe that the staying power of the essay reflects its utility as a framework for housing past experimental results and for generating new research."

1. Heider F. *Psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley. 1958. 322 p.

2. Kelley H H. Attribution theory in social psychology. *Nebraska symposium on motivation*. (Levine D.. ed.), Lincoln. NE: Univ, Nebraska Press. 1967, p. 192-240.