

This Week's Citation Classic

McArthur L. A. The how and what of why: some determinants and consequences of causal attribution. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 22:171-93, 1972.
[Brandeis University, Waltham, MA]

Kelley's attribution theory was supported. Behaviors that were nondistinctive and/or nonconsensual were attributed to causes in the actor, while distinctive and/or consensual behaviors were attributed to causes in a target stimulus. Behaviors that were inconsistent over time were attributed to circumstantial causes. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 180 publications since 1972.]

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"It was 1968, my third year in graduate school at Yale University. Having completed a pre-dissertation research requirement, I had a year to do whatever research I liked before embarking on my dissertation. In a seminar taught by Chuck Kiesler during the preceding semester, I had read a paper by Harold Kelley¹ that I found a refreshing change from dissonance theory which so dominated the recent literature. Whereas dissonance theory viewed people as 'rationalizing creatures' and systematically demonstrated how they rather foolishly changed their beliefs in order to justify their behavior, Kelley's attribution theory viewed people as 'naive scientists' who logically weighed information in order to make correct inferences about the causes of their own and others' behavior. This view of human thought was more in keeping with my own 'naive psychology' than the dissonance view, and I decided to test it.

"The method that I chose was inspired by a questionnaire methodology that my adviser, Bob Abelson, had developed to study inductive and deductive inference.² It was easily adapted to attribution theory ques-

tions, and permitted a comprehensive test of Kelley's model within a single experiment. After collecting the data and performing some cursory statistical analyses that revealed strong support for Kelley's model, I put this research aside and began planning my dissertation research.

"Like most graduate students, I wanted my dissertation to be earthshaking...and I didn't really think that my test of Kelley's theory was sufficiently exciting. In consultation with the requisite three faculty advisers, I designed and executed my intended *magnum opus*. The results I obtained were confusing, at best. Having approved my research design, my advisers could not reject this work simply because the results were disappointing. But I hated to write a lengthy dissertation that culminated in such meager findings. So, I asked if I might submit my earlier study testing Kelley's model as my dissertation research. Thanks to the willingness of my committee to bend the rules, this study became my 'adopted' dissertation, and I gave it much more time and thought than I would otherwise have done. Indeed, had my 'real' dissertation panned out, it is possible that this much cited study would never have been published. But certainly someone would eventually have published data supporting Kelley's model. While I like to think that the extensive citation of my experiment does reflect its merits, I know that it also reflects my good fortune to have done the right thing at the right time.

"Attribution theory's time had come. In rapid succession was the publication of not only Kelley's theory but also the attribution theories of Jones and Davis³ and Bem.⁴ These works have inspired researchers for more than a decade, during which time attribution theory has come to dominate the field as dissonance theory did before it. Oddly enough, however, what first drew me to attribution theory—its conceptualization of human thought as rational—no longer typifies attribution research. Most current work stresses the errors and biases in causal thinking, not the essential logic."⁵

1. Kelley H H. Attribution theory in social psychology. *Nebr. Symp. Motiv.* 15:192-238, 1967.
[The SSCI indicates that this paper has been cited in over 795 publications since 1967.]
2. Abelson R P & Kanouse D E. The subjective acceptance of verbal generalizations. (Feldman S, ed.) *Cognitive consistency: motivational antecedents and behavioral consequents*. New York: Academic Press, 1966. p. 171-97.
3. Jones E E & Davis K E. From acts to dispositions: the attribution process in person perception. (Berkowitz L, ed.) *Advances in experimental social psychology*. New York: Academic Press, 1965. Vol. 2. p. 219-66.
4. Bem D I. Self-perception: an alternative interpretation of cognitive dissonance phenomena. *Psychol. Rev.* 74:183-200, 1967.
5. Nisbett R E & Ross L. *Human inference: strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980. 334 p.