

This Week's Citation Classic

Heider F. *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley, 1958. 322 p.
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This book examines people's naive, intuitive understanding of interpersonal events. These commonsense inferences sometimes are biased, but nonetheless mediate interpersonal relations. The book presented the idea of attribution, which profoundly influenced the next two decades of work in social psychology. [The *SSCI*[®] and the *SCI*[®] indicate that this book has been cited in more than 3,650 publications.]

Probing the Depths of Commonsense Psychology

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Fritz Heider's *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* has been a social-psychology classic for the last 30 years. This book provides a rich examination of commonsense psychology, people's naive understanding of events in their worlds. The book had an enormous influence on the development of the general problem of how people perceive one another and the more specific area of attribution theory in social psychology, including the pioneering works by E.E. Jones and K.E. Davis,¹ and H.H. Kelley.²

The book was the culmination of almost 40 years of theoretical analysis by Heider. The seed for the book was planted in Heider's dissertation at the University of Graz, Austria, in 1920. Working with the philosopher Alexius Meinong, Heider wrote a dissertation, *Thing and Medium*, on the importance of the environmental conditions that make the perception of distant objects possible. It focused on the process that starts with the perceived object and ends with the stimuli that impinge on the sense organ (the proximal stimuli).

Over the years, Heider extended his conception on the perception of physical objects to the perception of other people and of self. At its core, this extension embodied the ideas of attribution and cognitive balance. Heider believed that people frequently make attributions about others and about themselves. He also believed that they try to arrange their worlds, including their thoughts, so as to achieve harmony and balance. Attributions refer to people's explicit and implicit understandings of the causes of

events and of responsibility for the outcomes of events. Heider believed that people have the ability to make causal inferences almost instantaneously in conjunction with their perception of the environment.

This position, which shows Heider's emphasis upon basic perceptual processes, has been elaborated and qualified by other attribution theorists. Despite a vast literature on attribution that sprang from Heider's writing, scholars still read and find many unexamined hypotheses and research ideas in *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. The durability and generality of this work was eloquently noted by Jones, in a 1987 retrospective review.³

In Heider's autobiography,⁴ he details the great difficulty he experienced in developing the ideas presented in his book and in gaining the respect of other scholars of interpersonal relations. For example, early in his career people laughed at his ideas that were presented to his colleagues at the University of Graz. Members of the audience at a similar talk at Harvard walked out without comment in the 1940s. But he persisted, and much can be learned about the value of tenacity in scholarship from his experience.

Heider circulated his book in mimeograph form among scholars, inviting commentary for *almost 15 years prior to its publication!* In his autobiography, Heider spoke of a time before his move to the University of Kansas in 1947 when he was so anxious about the development of his book (and the lack of funding for "conceptual research") that he felt paralyzed. He said that he imagined regularly a giant bird who mercilessly attacked him; as he noted, this imagery likely was an association from the Greek saga of Prometheus. Heider saw in this symbolic event the great struggle that he was facing in producing his work. He indicated that he finally got rid of the bird by mentally treating it in a familiar way and by offering himself to the bird. Heider said that the principle gained from that experience was the knowledge that he was not that important. That humility was a hallmark of Heider's character and life. His resolution of this period of self-doubt, along with the valuable help of Beatrice A. Wright, a long-term collaborator at Kansas, facilitated the culmination of his thinking and final work on the book manuscript.

Heider died in 1988. His wife Grace continues to live in Lawrence, Kansas. She too was a professor at the university and contributed in major ways to Heider's work.

1. 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. II. p. 219-66. (Cited 370 times.)
[See also: Jones E E. Citation Classic. (Smelser N J, comp.) *Contemporary classics in the social and behavioral sciences*. Philadelphia: ISI Press. 1987. p. 224.]
2. Kelley H H. Attribution theory in social psychology. (Levine D, ed.) *Nebraska symposium on motivation*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. Vol. 15. p. 192-240. (Cited 425 times.)
3. Jones E E. The seer who found attributional wisdom in naivety. *Contemp. Psychol.* 32:213-5, 1987.
4. Heider F. *The life of a psychologist: an autobiography*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press. 1983. 196 p.
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