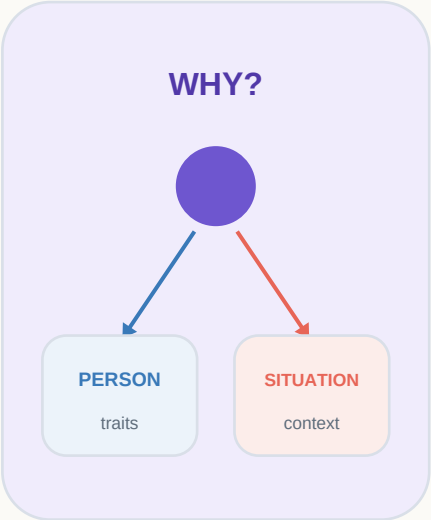
AP PSYCHOLOGY | UNIT 4

TOPIC 4.1

Attribution Theory and Person Perception

We explain behavior by weighing the person and the situation - but predictable biases can distort that judgment.



THE CORE ATTRIBUTION QUESTION

DISPOSITIONAL

Internal cause: traits, ability, personality, effort

SITUATIONAL

External cause: roles, stress, rules, barriers, context

BY THE END, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

1. Distinguish dispositional and situational attributions.
2. Identify fundamental attribution error, actor-observer bias, and self-serving bias.
3. Explain locus of control and major person-perception effects.

BIG IDEA

The same behavior can have different causes. Strong explanations use context and evidence instead of jumping from one action to a fixed personality judgment.

1 Attributions and their predictable biases

First identify whose behavior is being explained, then check whether person or situation is emphasized.

THREE HIGH-YIELD BIAS PATTERNS

FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

Whose behavior? another person's

Overweight disposition; underweight situation.

'They are lazy' - while ignoring illness or a transit delay.

ACTOR-OBSERVER BIAS

Whose behavior? self versus another

Own behavior -> situation; others' behavior -> disposition.

My lateness: traffic. Their lateness: irresponsibility.

SELF-SERVING BIAS

Which outcome? success versus failure

Success -> internal credit; failure -> external blame.

Win: skill and effort. Loss: unfair referee or bad luck.

EXPLANATORY STYLE

OPTIMISTIC

A setback is temporary or changeable; improvement seems possible.

PESSIMISTIC

A setback seems stable, broad, or difficult to change.

BETTER REASONING Ask: What situational information is missing? A personality explanation may be possible, but one behavior rarely proves a stable trait.

2 Control beliefs and person perception

Beliefs about control, familiarity, expectations, and comparison shape how people interpret themselves and others.

LOCUS OF CONTROL

INTERNAL LOCUS

My actions and effort can influence outcomes. This belief may support agency and persistence.

EXTERNAL LOCUS

Luck, fate, powerful others, or circumstances control outcomes.

Locus of control is a belief pattern - not a moral label, guarantee, or denial of real barriers.

FOUR PERSON-PERCEPTION EFFECTS

MERE EXPOSURE

Repeated exposure can increase liking or familiarity.

clue: seen many times

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A belief changes behavior in a way that helps confirm the belief.

clue: expectation -> action -> result

SOCIAL COMPARISON

Upward compares with someone better off; downward compares with someone worse off.

clue: self-evaluation by others

RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

A person feels deprived after comparing with others, even if absolute conditions are unchanged.

clue: comparison-based dissatisfaction

SELF-FULFILLING LOOP

EXPECTATION → BEHAVIOR → OTHER'S RESPONSE → CONFIRMATION

Name the concept + identify the comparison or belief + show how it changes judgment or behavior.