Chapter 4

Social Perception:
How We Come to Understand Other People

Discussion Question

- When you text or email, do you regularly use emojis, smiley faces, or other strategies for conveying emotional tone?

Learning Objectives

4.1　　How do people use nonverbal cues to understand others?

4.2　　How quickly do first impressions form, and why do they persist?

4.3　　How do people determine why others do what they do?

4.4　　What role does culture play in processes of social perception and attribution?

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Nonverbal Communication

4.1 How do people use nonverbal cues to understand others?

When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another, a practiced man relies on the language of the first. – Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*

Social Perception (2 of 3)

- Why are people the way they are?

- Why do people act the way do?

  – Thinking about people and their behavior helps us to understand and predict our social world

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Social Perception (3 of 3)

- The study of how we form impressions of and make inferences about other people.

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Nonverbal Behavior

- Nonverbal Communication
  - How people communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, without words
  - Examples:
    - Facial expressions
    - Tone of voice
    - Gestures
    - Body position
    - Movement
    - Use of touch
    - Gaze

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Evolution and Facial Expressions

- Crown jewel of nonverbal communication: the facial expressions channel

- Why?

    – Communicativeness of human face

Evolution and Facial Expressions (2 of 3)

- **Encode**

  – Express or emit nonverbal behavior

    ▪ Examples: smiling, patting someone on the back

- **Decode**

  – Interpret the meaning of nonverbal behavior

    ▪ Example: deciding pat on the back was an expression of condescension, not kindness

- **Darwin**

  – Nonverbal forms of communication is species, not culture, specific

  – Example: Susskind and colleagues (2008)

    ▪ Studied facial expressions of fear and disgust

    ▪ Found that muscle movements opposite each other

      – Fear: enhanced perception—facial and eye movements increase sensory input (e.g., widening the visual field, increasing the volume of air in the nose, and speeding up eye movements)

      – Disgust: decreased perception—facial and eye movements decrease sensory input (e.g., eyes narrow and less air is breathed in)

These photographs depict facial expressions of the six major emotions. Can you guess the emotion expressed on each face?

Source: TIPS Images/AGE Fotostock; PhotosIndia.com RM 18/Alamy; OJenny/Shutterstock; Ollyy/Shutterstock; Maksym Bondarchuk/Shutterstock; Pathdoc/Fotolia; Fotolia; Page

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Facial Expressions of Emotion (2 of 2)

- Are facial expressions of emotion universal?

- Yes, for the six major emotional expressions

  – Anger, happiness, surprise, fear, disgust, and sadness

The Picture of Pride

The nonverbal expression of pride, involving facial expression, posture, and gesture, is encoded and decoded cross-culturally.

Source: Associated Sports Photography/Alamy

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McKayla and Barack Are Not Impressed

President Barack Obama and 2012 U.S. Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney show off their matching "McKayla is not impressed" faces. Recent research suggests that beyond the six major emotion expressions, other expressions may also be universally recognized.


Source: White House Photo/Alamy

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Why Is Decoding Sometimes Difficult?

- Affect blends

  – Facial expressions in which one part of the face registers one emotion while another part of the face registers a different emotion

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The Face of Multiple Emotions

Often, people express more than one emotion at the same time. Can you tell which emotions these people are expressing? (Adapted from Ekman & Friesen, 1975)
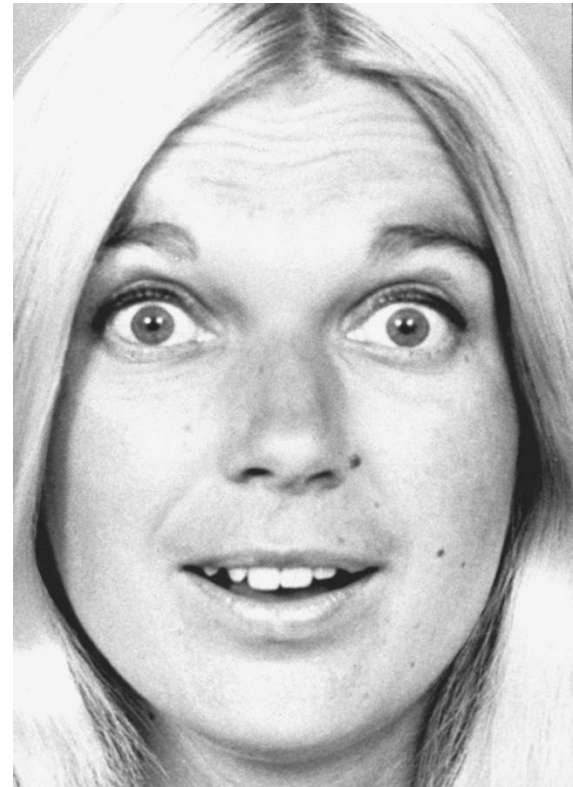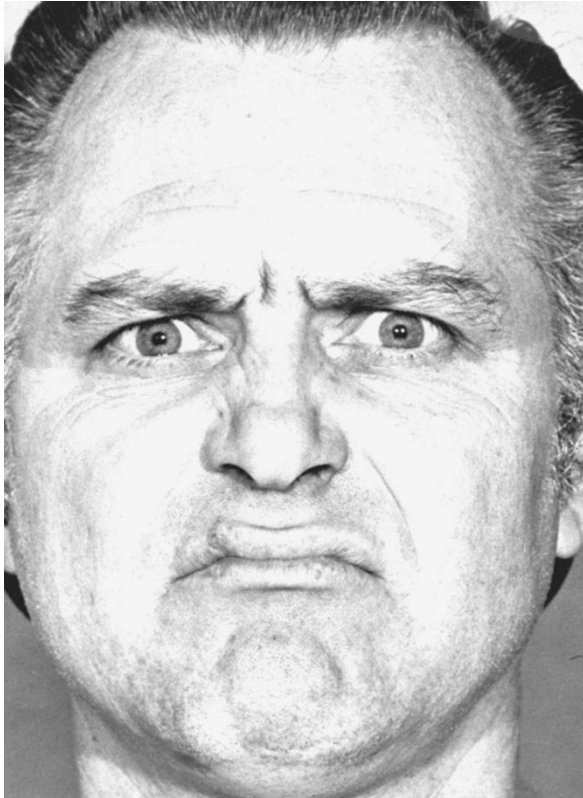
Source: The Paul Ekman Group, LLC

Culture and the Channels of Nonverbal Communication

- Display rules

  - Dictate what kinds of emotional expressions people are supposed to show

  - Are culture-specific

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Examples of Display Rule Differences (1 of 2)

- Display of emotion
  - America: men discouraged from emotional displays like crying, but women allowed
  - Japan: women discouraged from displaying uninhibited smile
- Eye contact/gaze
  - America: suspicious when people do not "look them in the eye"
  - Nigeria, Puerto Rico, Thailand: direct eye contact considered disrespectful

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Examples of Display Rule Differences (2 of 2)

- Personal space

  – America: like bubble of personal space

  – Middle East, South America, southern Europe: stand close to each other and touch frequently

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Emblems

- **Emblems**

  - Nonverbal gestures that have well-understood definitions within a given culture

  - Usually have direct verbal translations, like the "OK" sign.

- Emblems are not universal!

First Impressions: Quick but Long-Lasting

4.2 How quickly do first impressions form, and why do they persist?

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Impressions Based on the Slightest of Cues

- "Judging a book by its cover"

  - Easily observable things we can see and hear

  - Crucial to first impression

How quickly do first impressions form?

- Form initial impressions based on facial appearance in less than 100 milliseconds! (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Willis & Todorov, 2006)

- Infer character from faces as young as 3 years old (Cogsdill, Todorov, Spelke, & Banaji, 2014)

- Example: Baby faces

  – Features that are reminiscent of those of small children (e.g., big eyes, a small chin and nose, and a high forehead)

  – Tend to be perceived as having childlike traits—naïve warm, and submissive (Livingston & Pearce, 2009; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008)

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"Babyface" Edmonds: Friendly and Naive?

This is Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, American musical performer and producer. Research suggests that the same characteristics that earned him his nickname might also lead perceivers to jump to the conclusion that he is friendly, honest, and gullible.

Source: Jared Milgrim/Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

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Thin-Slicing

- Limited exposure can lead to meaningful first impressions of abilities and personalities

- Thin-slicing

  - Drawing meaningful conclusions about another person's personality or skills based on an extremely brief sample of behavior

Example of Thin Slicing

- Research question: How do college students form impressions of their professors? (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993)

- Participants rated 3 random 10-second video clips from 12 instructors' lectures

  – Removed audio track (silent video)

- Compared ratings of clips to end of the semester teaching evaluations from real students

- Results: Accurately predicted highest-rated teachers

The Lingering Influence of Initial Impressions

- ## Primacy Effect

  - When it comes to forming impressions, the first traits we perceive in others influence how we view information that we learn about them later

- ## Belief Perseverance

  - The tendency to stick with an initial judgment even in the face of new information that should prompt us to reconsider

- Public speaking:

  – Make sure opening is strong

- Job interview:

  – Dress, eye contact, body posture all affect evaluations

- Hand shake quality:

  – Affects assessments of personality and final hiring recommendations (Chaplin, Phillips, Brown, & Clanton, 2000; Stewart, Dustin, Barrick, & Darnold, 2008)

- Body language:
  - "Power posing"
- Example: Study examined body posture and posing (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010)
  - High-power pose: standing behind a table, leaning forward with hands planted firmly on its surface
  - Low-power pose: standing with feet crossed and arms wrapped around one's own torso
  - Results: Felt more powerful and adopted riskier strategy on gambling task in high-power versus low-power pose

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Power Posing on *House of Cards*

To watch the Machiavellian (and at times, bloodied) politician Francis Underwood in an episode of *House of Cards* is to witness Kevin Spacey putting his character through a series of high-status postures and poses. Research on power posing demonstrates that simply adopting a body posture typically associated with high-status can make us feel or act more powerful as well.

Source: Media Rights Capital/Album/Newscom

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Causal Attribution: Answering the "Why" Question

4.3 How do people determine why others do what they do?

Two Theories

- Two theories

  - Attribution Theory (Fritz Heider)

  - Covariation Model (Harold Kelley)

Attributions for Road Rage

According to Fritz Heider, we tend to see the causes of a person's behavior as internal. For example, when we see a driver exhibiting signs of "road rage," we are likely to assume that he is at fault for losing his temper. If we knew the person's situation–perhaps he is rushing to the hospital to check on a family member and another driver has just cut him off–we might come up with a different, external attribution.

Source: Minerva Studio/Fotolia

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The Nature of the Attribution Process (1 of 2)

- Heider
  - "Father" of attribution theory
  - "Naïve" or "commonsense" psychology
    - Viewed people as amateur scientists
      - Piece together information to figure out cause
- Attribution theory
  - The way in which people explain the causes of their own and other people's behavior

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The Nature of the Attribution Process (2 of 2)

- When deciding about causes of behavior, we can make one of two attributions

  – Internal, dispositional attribution

  – External, situational attribution

Internal Attribution

- Infer a person is behaving in a certain way because of something about the person (e.g., attitude, character, personality)

External Attribution

- Infer a person is behaving a certain way because of something about the situation

- Assume most people would respond the same way in that situation

Attributions in a Happy Marriage

Happy Marriage

- Partner's positive behaviors

    - Internal attributions

        - "She helped me because she's such a generous person."

- Partner's negative behaviors

    - External attributions

        - "He said something mean because he's so stressed at work this week."

Attributions in a Distressed Marriage

Distressed Marriage

- Partner's positive behaviors

    - External attributions

        - "She helped me because she wanted to impress our friends."

- Partner's negative behaviors

    - Internal attributions

        - "He said something mean because he's a totally self-centered jerk."

- A theory that states that to form an attribution about what caused a person's behavior, we systematically note the pattern between the presence or absence of possible causal factors and whether or not the behavior occurs

The Covariation Model: Internal versus External Attributions (2 of 3)

- Focuses on how behavior "covaries"

  – Across time, place, actors, and targets

- Examines how perceiver chooses an internal or an external attribution

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- We make choices about internal versus external attributions by using three pieces of information

  – Consensus

  – Distinctiveness

  – Consistency

Figure 4.2
The Covariation Model
Why did the boss yell at his employee Hannah? To decide whether a behavior was caused by internal (dispositional) factors or by external (situational) factors, people use consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency information.

Why did the boss yell at his employee Hannah?			
People are likely to make an **internal attribution**—it was something about the boss—if they see this behavior as	**low** in consensus: The boss is the only person working in the store who yells at Hannah	**low** in distinctiveness: The boss yells at all the employees	**high** in consistency: The boss yells at Hannah almost every time he sees her
People are likely to make an **external attribution**—it was something about Hannah—if they see this behavior as	**high** in consensus: All of the employees yell at Hannah too	**high** in distinctiveness: The boss doesn't yell at any of the other employees	**high** in consistency: The boss yells at Hannah almost every time he sees her
People are likely to think it was something peculiar about the particular circumstances in which the boss yelled at Hannah if they see this behavior as	**low or high** in consensus	**low or high** in distinctiveness	**low** in consistency: This is the first time that the boss has yelled at Hannah

Consensus Information

- The extent to which other people behave the same way toward the same stimulus as the actor does

Distinctiveness Information

- The extent to which one particular actor behaves in the same way to different stimuli

Consistency Information

- The extent to which the behavior between one actor and one stimulus is the same across time and circumstances

When Internal Attribution Occurs

- Internal attribution occurs when

  – Consensus = Low

    ▪ Behavior is unique to the person

  – Distinctiveness = Low

    ▪ Person displays same behavior with different targets and in different situations

  – Consistency = High

    ▪ The person's behavior occurs reliably across occasions

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When External Attribution Occurs

- External attribution occurs when

  – Consensus = High

    ▪ Other people behave similarly in the same situation

  – Distinctiveness = High

    ▪ The person's behavior is specific to that situation or target

  – Consistency = High

    ▪ The person's behavior occurs reliably across occasions

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Evaluation of the Covariation Model

- Information about all three dimensions may not be available

  - People still make attributions

- Consistency and distinctiveness used more than consensus

The Fundamental Attribution Error

- Tend to make internal attributions for other people's behavior and underestimate the role of situational factors

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Why Were People Sitting in Rosa's Seat?

Buses across the United States posted a sign like this one, asking riders to keep one seat empty to honor Rosa Parks.


Source: Bebeto Matthews/AP Images

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Figure 4.3
The Fundamental Attribution Error
Even when people knew that the author's choice of an essay topic was externally caused (i.e., in the no-choice condition), they assumed that what he wrote reflected how he really felt about Castro. That is, they made an internal attribution from his behavior. (Adapted from Jones & Harris, 1967)

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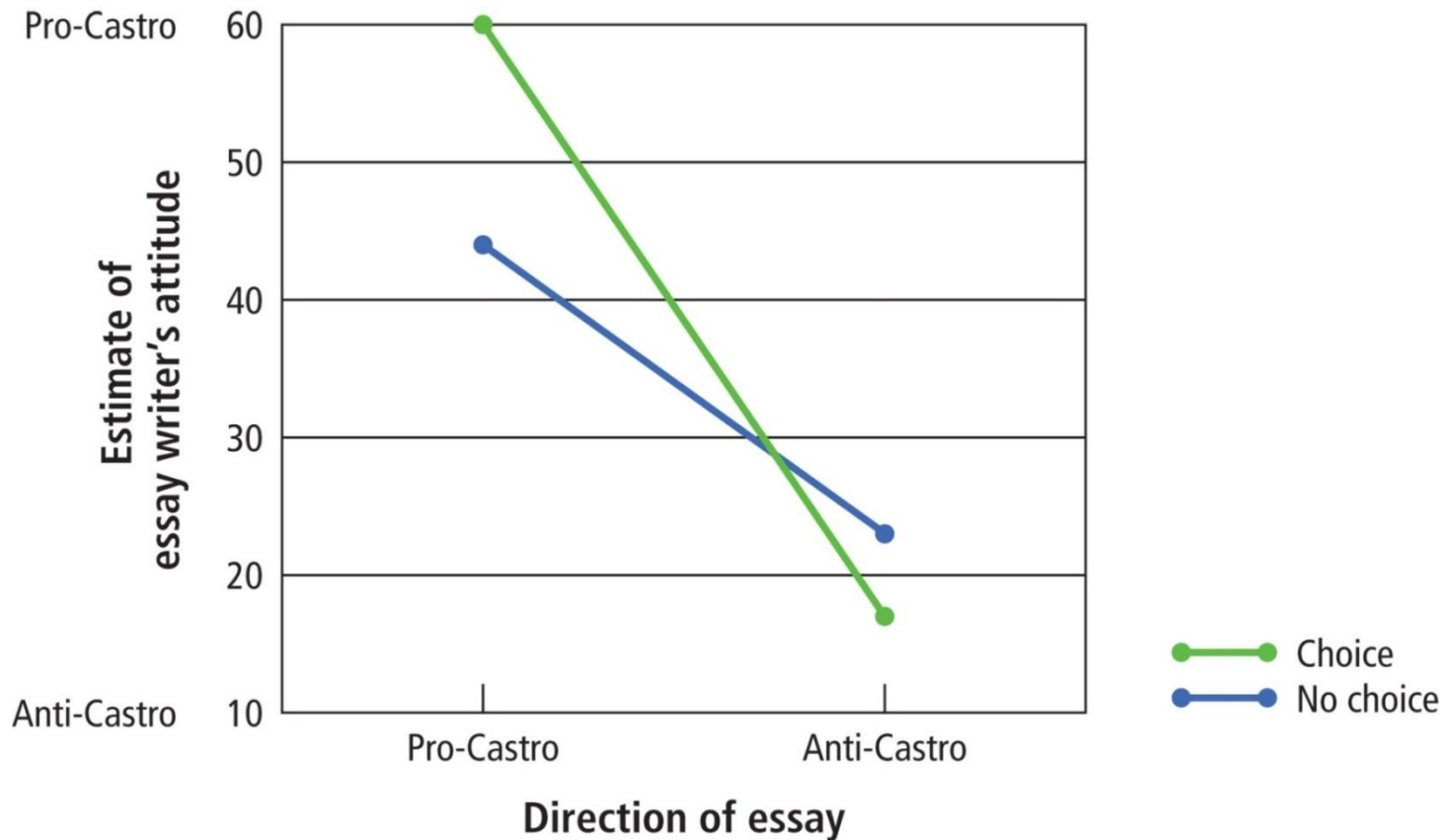
The Role of Perceptual Salience in the Fundamental Attribution Error

- Why does the fundamental attribution error occur?

  – Tend to focus attention on person, not the surrounding situation

  ▪ The person is "perceptually salient"

  – Use the focus of attention as a starting point

Perceptual Salience

The seeming importance of information that is the focus of people's attention

Figure 4.4
Manipulating Perceptual Salience
This is the seating arrangement for two actors and the six research participants in the Taylor and Fiske study. Participants rated each actor's impact on the conversation. Researchers found that people rated the actor they could see more clearly as having the larger role in the conversation. (Adapted from Taylor & Fiske, 1975)
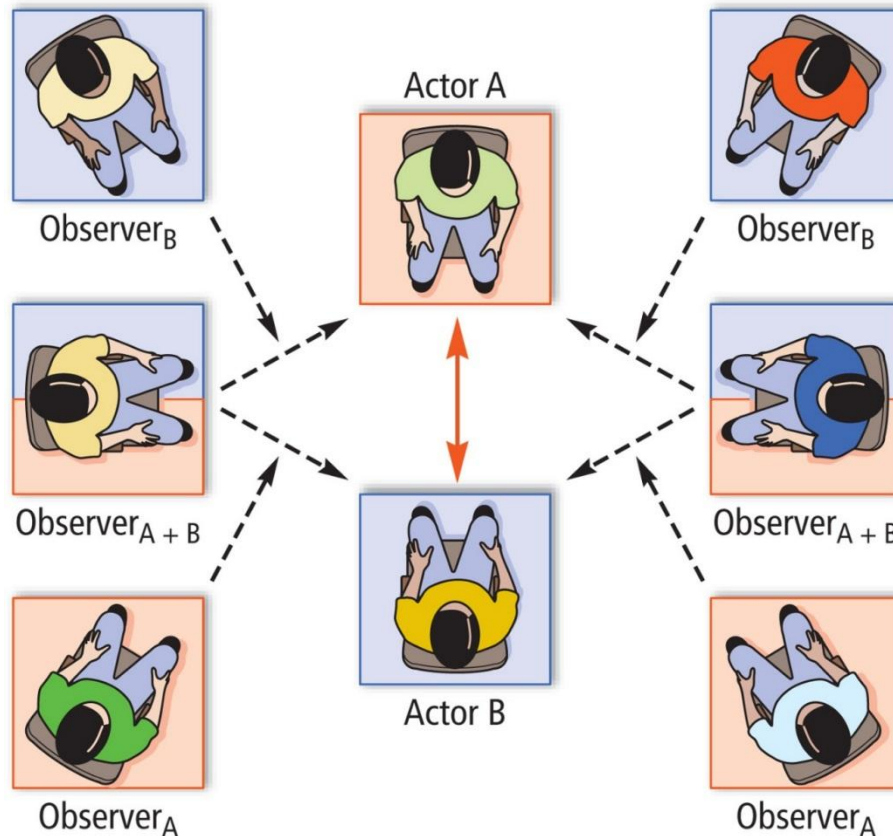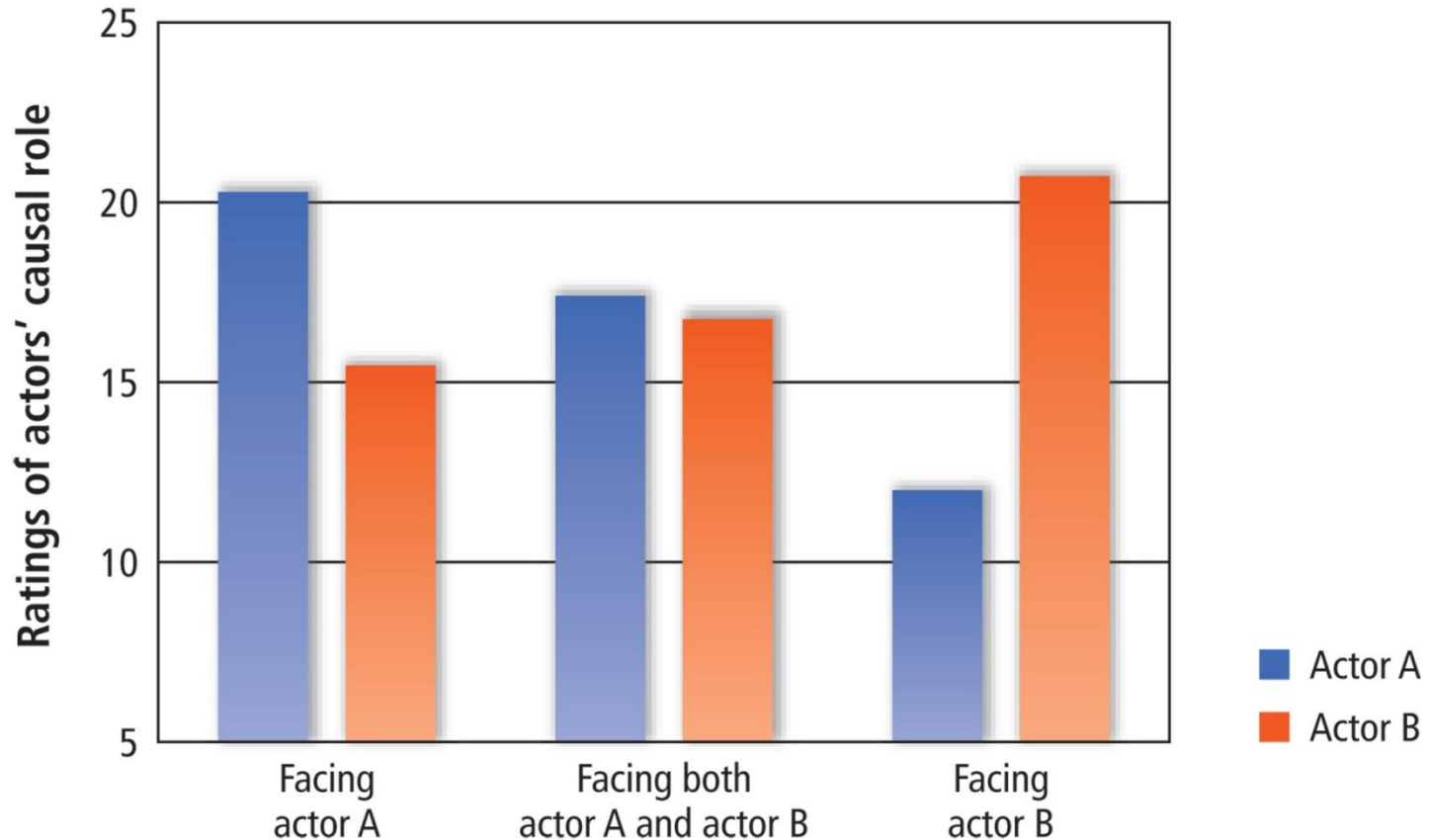
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Figure 4.5

The Effects of Perceptual Salience
These are the ratings of each actor's causal role in the conversation. People thought that the actor they could see better had more impact on the conversation. (Adapted from Taylor & Fiske, 1975)

The Two-Step Attribution Process (1 of 2)

1. Make an internal attribution

   – Assume that a person's behavior was due to something about that person

   – Occurs quickly, spontaneously

2. Adjust attribution by considering the situation

   – May fail to make enough adjustment in second step

   – Requires effort, conscious attention

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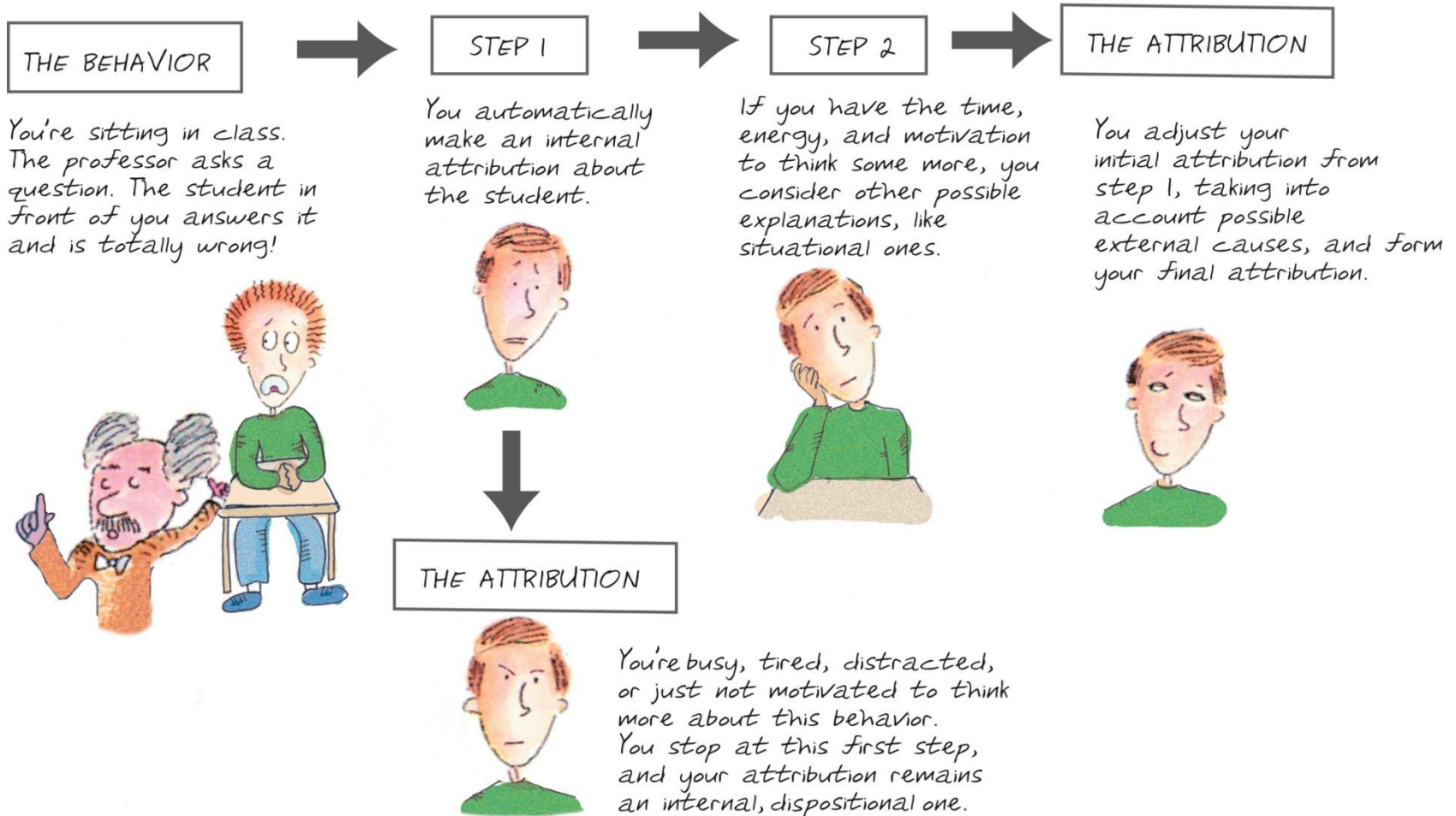# The Two-Step Attribution Process (2 of 2)

- Engage in the second step if:

  – You consciously slow down, think carefully before reaching a judgment

  – You are motivated to reach an accurate judgment

  – You are suspicious about the behavior (e.g., we suspect lying)

- Two-step model less applicable in cultures where internal attributions not the default

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Figure 4.6
The Two-Step Process of Attribution

THE TWO-STEP PROCESS OF ATTRIBUTION

THE BEHAVIOR → STEP 1 → STEP 2 → THE ATTRIBUTION

THE BEHAVIOR: You're sitting in class. The professor asks a question. The student in front of you answers it and is totally wrong!

STEP 1: You automatically make an internal attribution about the student.

STEP 2: If you have the time, energy, and motivation to think some more, you consider other possible explanations, like situational ones.

THE ATTRIBUTION: You adjust your initial attribution from step 1, taking into account possible external causes, and form your final attribution.

THE ATTRIBUTION: You're busy, tired, distracted, or just not motivated to think more about this behavior. You stop at this first step, and your attribution remains an internal, dispositional one.

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Self-Serving Attributions (1 of 2)

- Explanations for one's successes that credit internal, dispositional factors, and explanations for one's failures that blame external, situational factors

Self-Serving Attributions (2 of 2)

- Why do we make self-serving attributions?

  1. We want to maintain self-esteem.

  2. We want other people to think well of us and to admire us.

  3. We know more about the situational factors that affect our own behavior than we do about other people's.

The Burden of Solo Athletes

One domain in which self-serving biases may be particularly common is the world of sports, especially among solo athletes, for whom the entire weight of winning or losing rests on their shoulders.

Source: Oxford/Getty Images

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- Belief in a just world

  – The assumption that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get

  – Type of defensive attribution

- Advantage

  – Allows people to deal with feelings of vulnerability, mortality

- Disadvantage

  – Blaming the victim

    - Rape victims

    - Battered wives

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The "Bias Blind Spot"

- People realize biases in attribution can occur

- Believe other people more susceptible to attributional biases compared to self

Figure 4.7

Perceived Susceptibility to Attributional Biases for Self and the Average American

Research participants rated their own susceptibility to two attributional biases and that of the "average American." They believed that others were significantly more likely to engage in biased thinking than they themselves were. (Based on Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002)
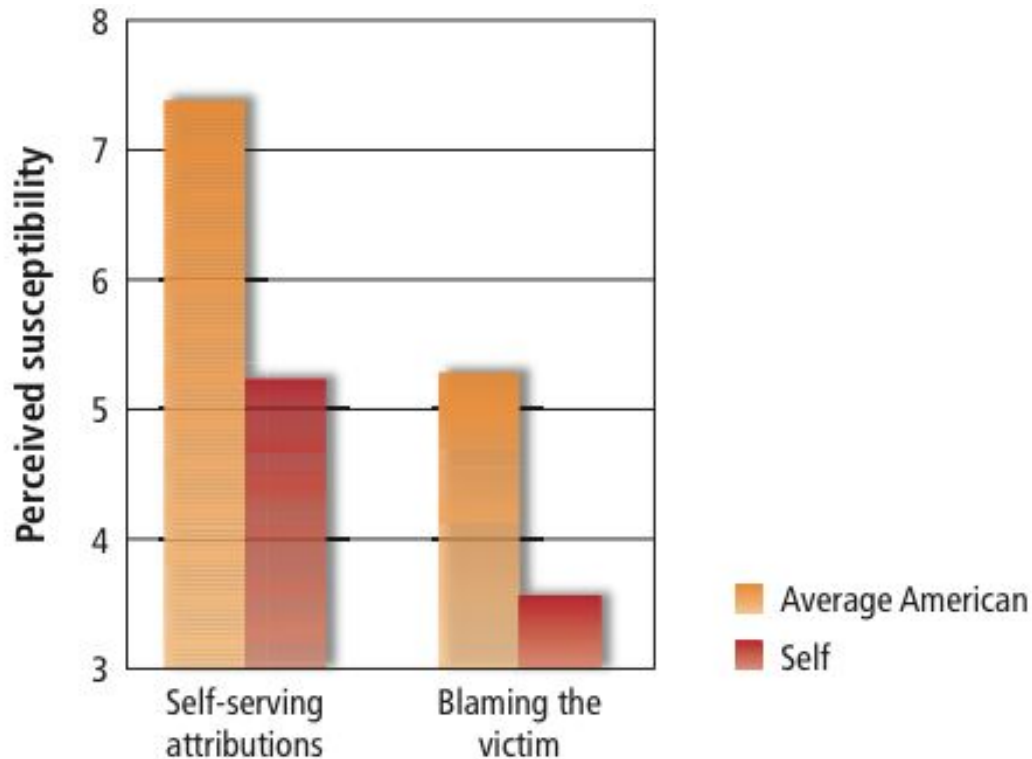
Culture and Social Perception

4.4 What roles does culture play in processes of social perception and attribution?

Holistic versus Analytic Thinking

- Holistic thinking
  - Values in Western cultures foster this kind of thinking
  - Focus on properties of object or people, pay less attention to context or situation
- Analytic thinking
  - Values in Eastern cultures foster this kind of thinking
  - Focus on the object or person AND the surrounding context and relationships between them
- Generalized cultural difference, but variability within cultures

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The Effect of a Group's Facial Expressions

What emotion do you think the central person (the one in the middle) is experiencing in each of these cartoons? Your answer might depend on whether you live in a Western or East Asian culture (see the text as to why).

Source: Masuda and Nisbett (2006)

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Social Neuroscience Evidence

- Hedden and colleagues (2008) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to identify where in the brain cultural experience predicts processing

- Judged length of line inside boxes

- Two conditions:

  - Ignore the box around each line (ignore context)

  - Pay attention to the box around each line (attend to context)

- Results:

  - Americans: greater brain activation when told to pay attention to context

  - East Asians: greater brain activation when told to ignore context

Cultural Differences in the Fundamental Attribution Error

- Members of individualistic cultures
  - Prefer dispositional attributions
  - Think like personality psychologists
- Members of collectivistic cultures
  - Prefer situational explanations
  - Think like social psychologists
  - Greater situational focus is matter of degree
    - Do they make dispositional attributions?
    - Are they more likely to go on to the "second step"?

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Primed for Cultural Influence

Bicultural research participants were first "primed" with images from one of their cultural heritages: either images evoking American culture or images evoking Chinese culture, like these.

Source: trubach/Shutterstock; Lissandra Melo/Shutterstock; Izmael/Shutterstock; bigredlynx/Shutterstock;

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The Effect of Cultural Priming

Next, these research participants were asked to make an attribution about the behavior of the fish in the front of the pack. Would they make dispositional or situational attributions about the fish's behavior, given the cultural priming they had experienced earlier?
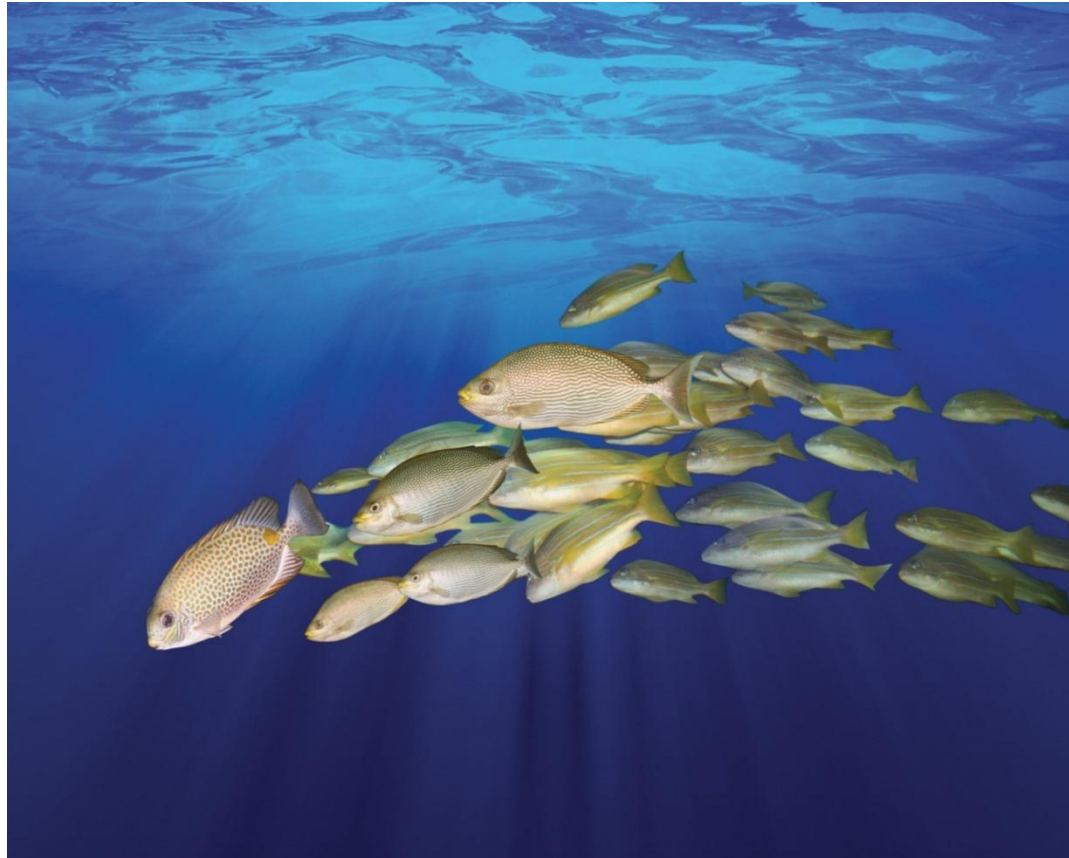
Source: violetkaipa/Shutterstock

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Culture and Other Attributional Biases (1 of 2)

- Self-serving bias

  - More prevalent in Western, individualistic cultures than Eastern collectivist cultures

- Explanations of Olympic Gold Success

  - Reporters discuss success in terms of unique talent in U.S., but incorporated role of other people (e.g., coach and family) in Japan

- **Failure**

  - Make attributions to external causes in U.S., but internal causes in China

  - Self-critical attributions hold groups together in some Asian cultures

- **Belief in a Just World**

  - More prevalent in cultures with extreme differences in wealth

Athletes' Differing Attributions

Sports competitors often make very different attributions for their outcomes based on whether they win or lose as well as cross-cultural variability in attributional tendencies.

Source: PCN Black/PCN Photography/Alamy

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Discussion Question Follow-up

- How might you use what you have learned about the power of nonverbal cues in social perception to be more effective in daily interactions?

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Summary and Review

- Nonverbal Behavior

- Attribution Theory (Heider)

- Covariation Model (Kelley)

- Fundamental Attribution Error

- Self-Serving Attributions

- Defensive Attributions

- Role of Culture in Social Perception

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