

4.1 Attribution Theory and Person Perception

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 18 marks**

KEY WORDS attribution 归因 • dispositional 内在 • situational 情境
 • fundamental attribution error 基本归因错误 • self-serving bias 自利偏差

Objective

Build the skills to answer exam questions on **attribution** 归因 and **person perception** 人际知觉.

You must be able to:

- distinguish a **dispositional** 内在 from a **situational** 情境 attribution
- describe the **fundamental attribution error** 基本归因错误
- explain the **self-serving bias** 自利偏差 and the **actor-observer** difference
- describe how **first impressions** and **stereotypes** 刻板印象 shape perception

1 Worked examples

Study these first. Each one shows the method for a task used later.

■ Two kinds of attribution

A **dispositional** attribution explains behaviour by the person's character; a **situational** attribution explains it by the circumstances. Most behaviour reflects both.

■ The fundamental attribution error

When explaining **others**, we overweight disposition and underweight situation. The driver who cuts in is "aggressive"; when we do it, we were late for a reason.

■ Self-serving and actor-observer

The **self-serving bias** attributes our successes to disposition and our failures to situation. The **actor-observer** difference is the wider version: we see our own situation and only the other person's behaviour.

■ First impressions and stereotypes

Impressions form fast and then bias later interpretation, so ambiguous behaviour is read to fit the impression. A **stereotype** does the same at group level, supplying expectations before any individual evidence.

2 Practice

2.1 State the difference between a dispositional and a situational attribution. [2]

2.2 Explain the fundamental attribution error with one example. [2]

2.3 A student attributes a good grade to ability and a bad one to an unfair test.

(a) Name the bias. [1]

(b) State one function it serves. [1]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 Explaining a stranger's rudeness by their personality rather than their circumstances illustrates [1]

- **A** the self-serving bias
- **B** the fundamental attribution error
- **C** a situational attribution
- **D** stereotype threat

3.2 We tend to explain our own behaviour situationally because [1]

- **A** we are more honest about ourselves
- **B** we can see our own situation but only others' behaviour
- **C** disposition does not apply to us
- **D** we have no self-knowledge

3.3 An interviewer forms an impression in the first minute.

- (a) State one way this can bias the rest of the interview. [1]
- (b) Suggest one procedural safeguard and justify it. [2]

3.4 Applied research task. A driver cuts across two lanes in front of Maya. She thinks “what a selfish driver”. Later that week Maya does exactly the same thing and thinks “I had to, my exit was coming up”. When she is asked to explain her own good exam result she says she worked hard; when a classmate does well she says the paper was easy.

- (a) Name the bias shown in the first situation and the bias shown in the comparison between the two. [2]

- (b) Explain the difference between a dispositional and a situational attribution, using Maya’s two explanations of the same act. [2]

- (c) Name and explain the bias shown by Maya’s explanations of the exam results. [2]

- (d) Explain **one** reason why the actor–observer difference occurs. [1]

Solutions

2.1 dispositional explains behaviour by the person’s character; situational explains it by circumstances.

2.2 overweighting disposition when explaining others’ behaviour; e.g. calling a driver aggressive rather than considering they may be rushing to an emergency.

2.3 (a) the self-serving bias. (b) it protects self-esteem.

3.1 B. the situation is discounted in favour of a trait explanation.

3.2 B. our own circumstances are visible to us; others’ are not.

3.3 (a) later ambiguous answers are interpreted to fit the impression. (b) use a structured interview with fixed questions and scored criteria, because it forces the same evidence to be gathered and rated for every candidate.

3.4 (a) The **fundamental attribution error** (1); the **actor–observer bias** (1).

(b) A **dispositional** attribution explains behaviour by the person’s stable characteristics — “selfish driver” (1). A **situational** attribution explains it by the circumstances — “my exit was coming up”. Maya applies the first to someone else and the second to herself for the identical act (1).

(c) The **self-serving bias** (1) — success is attributed internally, to her own effort, while another’s success is attributed externally, to an easy paper; it protects self-esteem (1).

(d) When acting, the situation is what you can see and the pressures on you are salient; when observing, the **person** is the most visible thing in the scene and their circumstances are not, so attention falls on disposition (1).