

# Survey Research and the Fundamental Attribution Error

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*The fundamental attribution error appears in survey research attitudes when response marginals are interpreted as clear indications of the attitudes and beliefs of the general population.*

“Behavior has such salient properties,” wrote Fritz Heider in 1958, “that it tends to engulf the field rather than be confined to its proper position as a local stimulus whose interpretation requires the additional data of the surrounding field—the situation.” By this Heider meant that when we consider the behavior of others we look for its source in personal character and attitudes, failing to recognize the degree to which human behavior is often largely a response to external forces.

Thus, in viewing the classic social psychological experiments by Asch (1952) on conformity and by Milgram (1974) on obedience, we underestimate the likelihood with which normal people in a laboratory situation can be induced to conform to peer pressure or to the commands of scientific authority. Likewise and more pervasively, in daily life we often attribute the actions of others entirely to personal dispositions when, in fact, we should give more emphasis to the situational pressures—especially the social pressures—that impinge upon individuals and shape their behavior. Ross (1977) has summarized this human failing as the “fundamental attribution error”—the tendency “to overestimate the importance of personal and dispositional factors relative to environmental influences.”

Does the “fundamental attribution error” operate in survey research? It does, and in a way long noted in practical terms by experienced survey investigators, though often ignored by those new to interpreting polls and surveys. The error manifests itself primarily in taking “marginals” too seriously as indicators of the dispositions of the general population. Thus, it is incorrect to assume that if 46% of the public say they would not “forbid” a kind of speech this means that 54% would “allow” the speech, for the words themselves exert an influence on the marginals (Rugg, 1941). Likewise, if 10% of a sample say spontaneously that they have “no opinion” on an issue, this does not mean that the other 90% do have firm opinions, for we know that by simply introducing a “no opinion” alternative into the question we can usually raise that 10% three-fold (Schuman & Presser, 1981). Also, almost any pretest experience will show that the proportion of people who place themselves in a particular category of a pro-con item can

readily be altered by introducing more gradations in the set of offered alternatives. Indeed, for some questions we can shift marginals substantially merely by changing the race or sex of the interviewers.

Questions and interviewers are the surrounding field in Heider's terms, while the respondent's answer is the behavior. To interpret answers as representing in a literal way the inner dispositions of a population is to forget the extent to which survey responses are shaped by the surrounding field. This is not to say that response marginals are never robust in the face of changes in form, wording, or context. For example, changing "abortion" to "end pregnancy" had no discernible effect on marginals in one experiment (Schuman & Presser, 1981), despite claims by partisans that it would alter responses. The term "error" in the fundamental attribution error is really something of a misnomer, for the intent is to say that the environment is usually a more important source of behavior than we expect, but not that it is always more important than we expect. The problem with marginals, as with other indicators of behavior, is that we cannot know from viewing them in a single setting just how stable they are—how easy or difficult it would be to shift them by exerting some force, such as a change in the form, wording, or context of the question.

No great insight is claimed here, but it is interesting that an old premise of survey research—that we can usually shift marginals noticeably by tinkering with questions—is really a special version of statements about the fundamental attribution error. There is, it seems, a direct connection between what we know about survey responses and the line of experimental results in social psychology that dates back to Asch—indeed, extends back to Triplett's (1897) observation that children wind fishing rods at different speeds depending upon whether they are alone or in the presence of other children also winding fishing rods.

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