Exploring the Ultimate Attribution Error: A Virtual Reality Study on Natives, Immigrants, and Perceptual Salience

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Abstract

According to the attribution theory, individuals explain the causes of a behavior through cognitive processes. A cognitive distortion known as attribution bias occurs when an individual makes systematic errors when explaining the fundamental causes of a behavior. This includes their own behavioral motivations as well as those of others. Ultimate attribution error is the tendency to attribute negative outgroup behavior to disposition factor and negative ingroup behavior to external circumstances. The majority of intergroup research on attributions focuses on racial distinctions. This study investigates the ultimate attribution error committed by Turkish individuals in the context of intergroup relations between Syrian immigrants and Turkish citizens in Turkey. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the other's out-group status and perceptual salience on the ultimate attribution error.

In contrast to the majority of studies that employ vignettes or videotapes, we investigated these effects using a Virtual Reality (VR) configuration with virtual agents of a Turkish national

and a Syrian immigrant. We hypothesized that Turkish citizens will make more dispositional attributions toward the Syrian immigrant agent in a negative scenario. Plus, the perceptually salient agent is expected to be considered acting more in line with his disposition than with environmental causes. Besides, as the literature suggests, perceptually salient agent is expected to be attributed with more causality about the conversation. In addition to measuring attributions, emotional and physiological (heart rate) reactions were also assessed.

Results on the ultimate attribution error yielded a significant interaction effect of perceptual salience and whether the agent is a Turkish native or an immigrant Syrian. For the Syrian agent in a negative scenario, being visually salient compared to being not perceptually salient made it more likely that his behavior is attributed to a personal decision. Moreover, the participants were more likely to attribute the cause of the Turkish agent's negative behavior to his personal decision when the Turkish agent's face is not visible and the Syrian agent's face is visible compared to the case where the Turkish agent's face is visible and the Syrian agent's face is not visible. The findings shed light on how perceptual salience moderates the impact of the out-group or in-group status on causal attributions. The study's contribution lies at the intersection of social and political psychology and cognitive science in two respects. First, how perceptual salience affects causal attributions may depend on the specific intergroup context. Second, the level of immersion experienced in the intergroup context may shape the causal attributions.

Biography

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