Recent Attribution Research in Consumer Behavior: A Review and New Directions

VALERIE S. FOLKES*

Recent consumer behavior research testing attribution theory principles is summarized and critiqued. Most studies on antecedents of causal inferences focus on how information about a product influences attributions, how the discounting effect influences liking for products, and how self-perception processes influence willingness to participate in marketing research. Research examining consequences of causal inferences focuses on product satisfaction. Major trends in attribution theory and future research directions are indicated.

Attribution research is concerned with all aspects of causal inferences: how people arrive at causal inferences, what sort of inferences they make, and what the consequences of these inferences are. Nine years ago, Mizerski, Golden, and Kernan (1979) provided an overview of four major attribution theories and reviewed the relevant consumer behavior research from 1971 to 1978. Since that time attribution theory has remained a popular approach in social psychology (e.g., see recent reviews by Harvey and Weary 1984; Ross and Fletcher 1985); however, most of us probably agree that despite a promising beginning, attribution theory has had little impact on the field of consumer behavior.

This apparent neglect is surprising. Understanding consumers’ perceptions of cause-and-effect relationships would seem to be central to consumer behavior. It is this author’s opinion that many, if not most, products and services are purchased because consumers infer a causal relationship: they believe that analgesics reduce pain, deodorants improve one’s social life, athletic shoes enhance performance, and so on. As the present review will substantiate, attribution theory is a rich and well-developed approach that has a great deal to say about a wide range of consumer behavior issues. For example, attribution research indicates when consumers recommend products to other consumers and when they complain about problems. It sheds light on such questions in persuasion as source credibility and two-sided messages. Attribution research illuminates the relationship between consumers’ attitudes and behaviors.

The purpose of this article is to increase the awareness of attribution theory’s contributions to consumer behavior, as well as to review research since the Mizerski et al. article. Many recent studies address issues not raised in the Mizerski et al. review, which focused on theories forming the foundation of attribution research (Bem 1972; Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967, 1973). Besides summarizing studies in consumer behavior journals, the present review includes consumer behavior experiments published in psychology journals. When studies on a topic are published in a variety of outlets, as is true of attribution research in consumer behavior, its impact may be diffused. By consolidating the research, this review aims to more clearly identify issues that have attracted the interest of investigators. A secondary aim is to identify up-to-date reviews of specific topics in attribution research to aid those who wish to explore an issue in depth.

The review is organized into four sections. The first section provides a brief summary of attribution theory development and key concepts. The second section identifies causal ascriptions of interest to those in consumer behavior, thus specifying the domains in which attribution theory is and might be useful. The article next reviews theory and recent research examining antecedents and consequences of these causal ascriptions. The final section provides an overview of central issues in attribution theory since the Mizerski et al. (1979) article and indicates additional directions for future research.

THE ORIGINS OF ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory is actually several theories that share core assumptions. The seminal concepts underlying attributional approaches are found in Heider’s (1958) book, The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations. First, Heider believed it was valuable to understand an individual’s “naive” or common sense explanations of
the world. This phenomenological approach contrasted with behaviorist theories popular at the time. Heider even used layman’s terms, such as “can” and “try,” to analyze how people make causal inferences. Second, Heider distinguished among types or categories of causes. A basic distinction was between actions due to personal causes and those related to the environment or situation. For example, a canoeist might reach the other side of the lake because of personal causes (e.g., the canoeist’s effort) or because of environmental causes (e.g., currents).

Another core concept involves the nature of this inferential process. The layman’s explanations are naïve in that they are not scientifically conceptualized, analyzed, and tested. Yet the process by which people arrive at explanations is similar to the way scientists arrive at explanations—in a fairly logical and analytical fashion. This is not to say that people are error-free when making causal inferences. Heider pointed out a number of biases or distortions, such as overestimating the impact of features salient in the perceiver’s environment. Regardless of accuracy, perceived causality influences the perceiver’s subsequent actions.

Heider’s book contains many fascinating ideas, but Harold Kelley drew attention to those dealing with attributions in an early book review. Additionally, Kelley (1967, 1972) wrote several theoretical papers that elaborated on how individuals infer causes. These models of attributional antecedents are more complex than Heider’s. Both Heider and Kelley (1967) identified covariation of cause and effect as an important determinant of causal inferences. For example, because turning a light switch is closely followed by a room’s lights being turned on or off, people infer that one causes the other. Kelley identified types of causal inferences arising from fairly complex configurations of events covarying over time, across situations, and across individuals. But each occasion does not give rise to the extensive assembling of information required by covariation analysis. People learn cause and effect patterns that enable them to make inferences quickly. These schemata facilitate the attribution process.

Another early theory about causal inferences, correspondent inference theory, was developed by Jones and Davis (1965) and later modified by Jones and McGillis (1976). Correspondent inference theory is more narrow than Kelley’s approach. It emphasizes inferences made about another’s intentions and dispositions from the other’s actions. Although correspondent inference theory has not had much influence on attribution research, a related phenomenon, the actor-observer bias, has (Jones and Nisbett 1972). While the observer is inclined to attribute the actor’s behavior to the actor’s personal dispositions, the actor is more likely to attribute the same action to situational factors. Consistent with Heider’s orientation, explanations for this bias draw on cognitive or perceptual factors as well as on motivational or egocentric factors.

Whereas the actor-observer bias examined how attributions for one’s own behavior differ from those of an observer, Bem (1972) focused on similarities between actors’ and observers’ causal inferences. He argued that one forms attributions about one’s own behavior the same way one arrives at attributions for others’ behaviors. One observes the behavior and the context in which it occurs and then makes inferences about what caused it. This approach contrasts with Heider’s theory. Bem maintains that actions precede cognition; people act, then arrive at explanations for the action that may in fact have had no influence on that action.

Heider’s analysis of types of causes has been most extensively developed by Weiner (1985a, 1986). Weiner identified general properties of causes (such as the personal versus the situational), but Weiner elaborated on and more precisely identified causal dimensions or underlying causal structure. These causal dimensions (e.g., locus of control), as well as specific causes (e.g., effort, ability), influence a variety of behavioral consequences (e.g., expectancies, affect). Although Weiner’s theory was originally grounded in achievement behavior, Weiner has extended the model into a more general theory of human motivation.

These theoretical developments attracted consumer researchers’ attention in the early seventies (e.g., Settle 1972; Settle and Golden 1974). During this time, consumer research using an attributional approach typically drew on either Kelley’s or Bem’s theory, primarily contributing to the attitude and persuasion literature. Studies examined a variety of topics, including source credibility (e.g., Dholakia and Sternthal 1977), the effects of coupons and other promotional incentives on consumers’ attitudes (e.g., Scott 1977), and children’s inferences about advertisers’ motives (e.g., Robertson and Rossiter 1974). Research prior to 1978 has been reviewed by Mizerski et al. (1979) and will not be detailed in this article.

CAUSAL ASCRITIONS EXAMINED BY CONSUMER RESEARCH

Recent attribution research has examined consumers’ causal inferences for a variety of outcomes—inferences about the consumer’s own behavior, about a product’s success or failure, and about a communicator’s endorsement of a product (cf. Zaltman and Wallendorf 1983). A commonly studied paradigm examines attributions for product purchase or selection; consumers infer why they have purchased or selected a product. These studies typically manipulate consumers’ beliefs so that they attribute selection either to liking for the product or to situational constraints or incentives, such as the consumer selected it to please someone else or because a coupon could be redeemed (e.g., Scott and Yalch 1980; Tybout and Scott 1983).

A related body of research concentrates less on the consumer as a causal agent than on the myriad causal
inferences a consumer makes for product performance. These studies examine one's own and others' attributions for why a product or service failed, although a few have also examined product success (e.g., Curren and Folkes 1987; Richins 1983). Attribution for product failure range from product defects and service delivery flaws to environmental interference and even to consumers' misuse of the product (Folkes 1984b). Mazursky, La Barbera, and Aiello (1987) examined reasons for switching brands of grocery products. Over 75 percent of the reasons related to price, coupon redemption, and desire to try a new brand.

Consumers also infer reasons for a product endorser's recommendation, i.e., Why did the celebrity agree to appear in the advertisement? (e.g., Sparkman 1982; Wiener and Mowen 1986). Investigators have typically manipulated consumers' perceptions of intrinsic incentives (the endorser's liking for the product) versus extrinsic (monetary) incentives for endorsement. A similar line of research assumes that consumers make causal inferences for others' positive and negative evaluations of products (e.g., Hunt, Domzal, and Kernan 1981; Kamin and Assael 1987).

Consumers also provide information about preferences and usage to marketers, so several studies examine effects of attributions on responses to market research mail surveys, i.e., Why should I take the time to complete this questionnaire? (e.g., Allen, Schewe, and Wijk 1980; Furse, Stewart, and Rados 1981; Hansen and Robinson 1980). Consumers' attributions for the firm's actions that are unrelated to product performance are relevant to the field but have yet to be explored (e.g., Why did the firm bribe the government? Why are the firm's employees on strike?), as well as attributions for consumer group, legislative, and regulatory actions (e.g., Why does Ralph Nader support this position? Why are gun control regulations lax?).

These slightly different attributional questions arise partly because different theories guide the research. For example, self-perception studies derive from Bem's (1972) work and focus on conditions facilitating the consumer's inference that purchase was intrinsically motivated by the product's qualities, whereas product performance studies derive from Weiner's (1986) taxonomy of causes and focus on attributional consequences.

ANTECEDENTS OF CONSUMERS' ATTRIBUTIONS

Most attribution research deals with how people go about forming causal inferences. There are three types of antecedents for causal inferences: motivations, information, and prior beliefs (Kelley and Michela 1980). Consumers may be motivated to arrive at certain causal inferences from hedonic or esteem needs. On the other hand, information about an action, such as how frequently it occurs and with what other actions it covaries, forms the basis for many attributions. Finally, people may have prior beliefs about the relationships among causes, such as beliefs about the strength of a cause when alternative possible causes are present, that lead to certain causal inferences. Whereas all three factors—motivations, information, and beliefs—often influence the kinds of attributions made in a single study, most research frames a problem in terms of just one type of antecedent.

Motivation

Protecting one's esteem forms the basis for motivational biases in most attributional research. A few consumer behavior studies have also found attributional patterns that may reflect motivational or esteem-related biases, that is, the tendency to attribute good outcomes to one's self (an internal or dispositional cause) and bad outcomes to external or situational causes. For example, consumers appear to blame others for bad experiences with products. In a survey of Netherlands' households, 90 percent of the respondents placed at least some blame for their dissatisfaction with clothing and appliance purchases on marketing institutions (Richins 1985).

But finding such a striking pattern of blaming firms does not necessarily mean that esteem needs bias consumer attributions. Patterns that observers interpret as ego protective may in fact arise because individuals have more complete access to their own intentions and expectations than do observers (but see Nisbett and Wilson 1977 for a different perspective). Most consumers use a product intending and even devoting effort toward its success, so attributing failure to others could be due to rational rather than to self-serving reasons. Consistent with this view is the finding that when making attributions for product failure, buyers (and sellers) display a pattern of self-serving biases even when they are in the "observer" role (i.e., reading about another's experiences) and self-esteem needs are minimized (Folkes and Kotsos 1986).

Some have suggested that research trying to identify the superiority of motivational or cognitive explanations for attributional biases is fruitless: both influence causal inferences but under different circumstances (e.g., Tetlock and Levi 1982). Thus, research should try to identify situations eliciting types of biases. Of course, there may be other reasons for these attributional patterns that relate to self-presentation goals or the public nature of communications about privately held beliefs (Harvey and Weary 1984). Researchers must depend on what consumers are willing to reveal about themselves.

Consumers may sometimes be in a similar predicament as the attributional researcher when evaluating the source and nature of causal inferences: buyers may have to evaluate whether sellers reveal reasons for their behaviors that are biased in self-serving ways. For example, shareholders in a company may be concerned
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ATTRIBUTION RESEARCH

with whether the information given to them by the firm’s employees is systematically biased and want to determine the source of the bias. Bettman and Weitz (1983) found that employees show a pattern of self-serving attributions in their letters to shareholders in annual reports. External (environmental), unstable (temporary), and firm-uncontrollable reasons were given for poor performance (e.g., lower profits were attributed to unusual economic conditions), but internal (firm-related), stable (permanent), and firm-controllable reasons were more frequent for good earnings (e.g., high profits due to the firm’s research and development efforts). The data could support neither a purely motivational nor a purely informational explanation for the firms’ explanations.

The False Consensus Effect. Some studies published in psychology journals examine a special type of motivational bias, the tendency to assume a false consensus for one’s behavior. Consumers prefer to believe that others share the same preferences and consumption habits: common behaviors seem more appropriate and reasonable than unusual behaviors and so bolster one’s self-esteem. As an example, consider smoking, an activity a minority of people engage in. Compared to nonsmoking adolescents, adolescent smokers overestimate the percent of others who smoke, partially as a means of self-validation (Sherman et al. 1983). Midwestern adolescent smokers show greater errors in estimating smoking rates than do Southwestern adolescent smokers because Midwesterners are more motivated to justify their behavior: smoking is a more deviant behavior in the Midwest. On the other hand, adult smokers and nonsmokers give similar estimates of the adult men in their city who smoke: adult smoking is a less deviant behavior than adolescent smoking and so requires less perceived commonality.

Similarly, nonconservationists justify their irresponsible behavior by believing that most others waste energy (Van der Pligt 1984, 1985). Engaging in a negative behavior (e.g., using phosphate detergents) led to extreme but favorable trait ratings of those who refrained from that negative behavior (e.g., phosphate users rated non-users as more responsible, clean, and environment-conscious than did nonusers). Apparently consumers engaging in disapproved of behaviors are motivated to believe those who refrain from these same behaviors do so because of unusual dispositional tendencies.

Motivational distortion of perceived consensus has also been demonstrated even when consumers’ actions are not negative. When undergraduates estimated their peers’ attitudes toward a possible tuition surcharge, hedonic relevance increased the students’ tendency to assume that others shared the same belief (Crano 1983). The greater the vested interest in the tuition surcharge, the more extreme were the estimates of agreement.

Whereas the false consensus studies reviewed here are limited to consumers’ attributions and these studies have found evidence for motivational influences, a meta-analysis of 115 false consensus studies found more evidence for information-based sources than for motivationally driven processes (Mullen et al. 1985). A recent review of the false consensus literature suggests that threat to self or highly evaluative situations motivate the individual to distort perceived similarity, but in other situations cognitive factors can lead to distortion (Marks and Miller 1987). Consider a cognitively based explanation of Sherman et al.’s (1983) study of smokers’ false consensus. Because people associate with similar others and because adolescent peer groups form exceptionally strong associative bonds, overestimating the number of fellow smokers may be a rational assumption for young people. (However, information-based explanations seem unable to account for the greater false consensus effect among Midwestern adolescents compared to those in the Southwest.)

At least one study of consumers supports an informational basis for the false consensus effect (Gilovich, Jennings, and Jennings 1983). Undergraduates rated their own preferences and consensus estimates for behaviors, including several consumption behaviors (e.g., eating white bread or brown bread, heating with wood or oil, purchasing IBM or Exxon stock). The false consensus effect was reduced or eliminated when students received information that their own preferences were idiosyncratic, but not when the information suggested their preference arose from situational characteristics. This malleability suggests that the false consensus effect for consumers can arise from incomplete information. As noted earlier, both hedonic needs and cognitive processes seem able to give rise to attributional biases.

Other Motivational Biases. In sum, motivational needs can lead to self-serving and false consensus attributions. Having documented these biases, future research should determine which situations give rise to motivational and cognitive biases. Other research might examine implications of these biases. For example, the false consensus effect may aggravate buying panics over scarce products. Because consumers assume others are competing against them for the same merchandise, delaying the purchase may appear especially risky.

Other possible consumer biases have yet to be fully explored. For example, although defensive attributions (the tendency to blame victims for events) have been explored peripherally in one study (Folkes and Kotsos 1986), it is clearly quite important to explore more deeply when these occur and more generally how consumers attribute blame. Numerous conflicts center on whether consumers or firms are to blame for consumers’ problems. For example, banks and consumer groups are in conflict over banks’ responsibility for robberies committed at automated teller machines (Schmitt 1987). Motivational and cognitive factors may bias attributions of blame in such instances (e.g., tendencies to blame the victim). Another attributional bias unex-
explored in consumer behavior is the false uniqueness effect—the tendency to see one's own actions as more atypical or unique (see Ross and Fletcher 1985 for a review). The snob appeal of some products may arise from consumers' desires to believe that they are more highly discriminating than others.

Information

The typical theoretical approach to understanding how consumers use information to make causal inferences is based on Kelley's (1967) covariation theory. Consensus, consistency over time and modality, and distinctiveness influence whether people attribute an effect to the person, the stimulus, or the situation. Applied to consumers, the corresponding causal agents could be the consumer, the product, and the situation (Bettman 1979). Thus, attributions to the individual purveyor, the product, or the particular occasion on which the consumer purchased or used the product depend on consensus with other consumers' responses toward the product, consistency of the individual consumer's response over time and situations, and distinctiveness of the consumer's response to this particular product as opposed to other products. For example, when few consumers like a certain brand (low consensus) but one particular consumer always likes that brand (high consistency), as well as many other brands (low distinctiveness), brand preference can be attributed to that particular consumer's personal idiosyncrasies rather than to the brand's inherent properties.

In the social psychological literature, Kelley's predictions receive general support, although some controversy has arisen over the use of consensus information (see Kassin 1979 for a review) and the kinds of information essential to make an attribution (e.g., Orvis, Cunningham, and Kelley 1975). Most supportive studies follow a methodology first employed by McArthur (1972), in which subjects read scenarios about hypothetical persons and indicate the likely source of causality for the person's behavior. Consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information is presented as high or low in a within-subjects design. Rholes and Pryor (1982) used a similar methodology to examine how information about consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness influences attributions for a consumer's behavior. Students read sentences following the format "the person likes the product," varying type of occupation (e.g., minister, teacher, writer) and product (e.g., cafe, movie, jacket), as well as consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. Subjects made attributions consistent with Kelley's hypotheses.

In a study examining only consensus information (Folkes and Kotsos 1986), high consensus (product failure is experienced by most consumers) was associated with attributions to the product (e.g., the product is poorly made) and low consensus (product failure experienced by only a few consumers) with attributions to the consumer (e.g., the consumer is careless) in a manner predicted by Kelley. Specifically, given an automobile breakdown shortly after being repaired, beliefs that cars commonly break down were related to identifying an inept mechanic as the source of the current problem; beliefs that the problem is uncommon for most drivers were related to identifying the individual driver as causing the present breakdown.

Recent studies examining consistency and distinctiveness as well as consensus find only mixed support for Kelley's theory. Sparkman and Locander (1980) found consensus influenced product attributions, but consistency over time and modality, and distinctiveness did not. Yalch and Yoshida (1983) varied covariation information about a new food co-op and then asked students to evaluate the store and indicate their confidence in their judgments. They found nonsignificant results for most attributions, but some results consistent with Kelley's conception.

Lichtenstein and Bearden (1986) suggest that mixed results in these studies arise from the dependent measure's level of abstraction, rather than from problems with Kelley's person, stimulus, and circumstance typology. Their research followed a similar methodology but used both general and specific causes as dependent measures. General attributions could be made to the person (an auto dealership), the stimulus (the model of car), and to circumstances; dependent measures in the study also included specific aspects of the person (e.g., the dealer's desire to enhance customer goodwill), the specifics of the stimulus (e.g., the car has poor styling), or the specific circumstances (e.g., to reduce inventory). The results suggest specific dependent measures better captured subjects' phenomenology than did more general categories of causes.

Another possible explanation for the weak results in the Sparkman and Locander (1980) and Yalch and Yoshida (1983) studies is that prior beliefs influenced subjects' attributions. Both studies involved more realism than the traditional McArthur paradigm. Sparkman and Locander asked mall shoppers to make attributions about an advertising spokesman's endorsement while Yalch and Yoshida asked undergraduates to evaluate a new food co-op actually being proposed for the campus. Whereas increased realism is an advantage of their methodologies in terms of external validity, beliefs about why people appear in advertisements and why people shop in co-ops may have more strongly influenced subjects' attributions than the manipulation. Thus, subjects' prior beliefs may have been given more weight than information provided by the experimenter.

Beliefs

Most recent research into antecedents of consumers' causal ascriptions investigates consumers' preexisting hypotheses, suppositions, and expectations. Of particular interest has been Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, often explored in conjunction with Bem's self-
The Discounting Principle and Communicator Credibility. The discounting principle represents one type of belief about how causes are related (Kelley 1973). People are hypothesized to discount or minimize the effect of an attribution for an action when an alternative attribution could account for the behavior. Although discounting and overjustification have been examined within a variety of contexts in the social psychology literature, consumer research on the discounting effect has emphasized its relevance for communicator credibility and market research response rates. When a product endorser has external reasons to account for favorable comments about a product, recipients of the communication often believe the product less worthy than when endorsement involves minimal or no external incentives. Thus, internal reasons for liking the product are discounted when an alternative reason for endorsement is presented. For example, when Frank Sinatra's endorsement of Chrysler autos was identified as being compensated at the rate of $1.00 per year, consumers evaluated Chryslers more positively than when no rate of pay was specified (Sparkman 1982). Similarly, second-hand autos were evaluated less positively when the mechanic endorsing the product had incentives for endorsing the auto's purchase compared to when no incentives were present (Wiener and Mowen 1986).

Because consumers often expect spokespersons to show bias in their product descriptions, Hunt et al. (1981) suggested that communicators gain credibility by disconfirming expectancies. Students reading ads in which the product's spokesperson admitted one attribute was "less than superior" evaluated the product more positively than when the spokesperson maintained all product attributes were superior. Surprisingly, ratings of the spokesperson's honesty and sincerity showed no effect. Thus, there was no evidence that perceived spokesperson trustworthiness mediated liking for the product.

In a field experiment also examining the impact of negative information in an ad (Swinyard 1981), some households received fliers describing both positive and negative store attributes (two-sided appeal), while other households received a flier giving only positive information (one-sided appeal). Consistent with the Hunt et al. study, two-sided ads were perceived as more credible than one-sided ads. Swinyard hypothesized that less counterargumentation in the two-sided condition mediated the effect, but the results did not support this interpretation.

Kamins and Assael (1987) found similar results in two experiments. One-sided appeals led to more source derogation than two-sided appeals. Further, subjects given one-sided appeals lowered their product evaluations when experience disconfirmed the source's promise. In contrast to Swinyard's (1981) study, one-sided appeals elicited less support and more counterargumentation than two-sided appeals.

Whereas the latter studies examined consumers' discounting as a result of spokesperson and employee endorsements, Mizerski (1982) compared evaluations of products when endorsed by another consumer as opposed to being disparaged. Students read purportedly real consumers' ratings of an automobile or a film, and then stated their own attitude toward the product. Reading disparaging or negative information led to stronger, more extreme evaluations of the film than did reading positive information, although findings were weaker for the auto. Apparently, students reading others' positive comments about films and autos tended to discount the evaluations, believing that praise is more socially acceptable and so less likely to reveal one's true feelings than are negative comments. These results are also consistent with research finding that negative evaluators (in this case, book reviewers) are seen as more intelligent, competent, and expert than are positive evaluators (Amabile 1983), and research finding a negativity bias in evaluations (Kanouse and Hansen 1972).

In sum, incentives for product endorsements influence the message recipient's liking for the product. Consumers appear to discount a communicator's recommendation if incentives or constraints are presented or are inferred. The result can be differential effects for negative information. On the one hand, consumers weigh negative product information from another consumer more heavily than positive information. On the other hand, including some negative information in an ad may enhance the credibility of positive information in the ad. Although the mediating role of attributions in this process is not as clear as one would hope, the social psychological persuasion literature lends confidence to an attributional interpretation (see reviews by Cooper and Croyle 1984; Eagly and Chaiken 1984).

This line of research might benefit by taking into account Eagly and Chaiken's (1984) distinction between reporting biases and knowledge biases. Endorsers may mislead targets because of reluctance to report their true beliefs (e.g., the mechanic in the Wiener and Mowen study had incentives for lying about the car) or because they possess nonveridical knowledge (e.g., Sinatra might sincerely recommend Chryslers but lack expertise about cars or Chryslers, in particular). Yet message involvement may limit the conditions under which inferences about communicators' motives influence persuasion (e.g., see Chaiken and Stangor 1987; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). On the one hand, credibility cues might be used more in low-involvement situations because they require less effort than evaluating the quality of the argument; on the other hand, low-message involvement might reduce the consumer's motivation to make complex inferences about incentives or constraints on the communicator.
Self-Perception Theory. The discounting principle has also been examined within the framework of Bem's self-perception theory. Although not originally conceived within an attribution framework, Bem (1972) argued that people arrive at attributions for their own behavior similar to the way an observer would; they observe their behavior and the external constraints on it and then form inferences. If so, then just as consumers discount internal reasons for another's behavior if external constraints are present, so should the individual apply the discounting principle to a causal analysis of his or her own behavior. Mizerski et al. (1979) reviewed numerous consumer behavior studies using this approach (e.g., Scott 1976, 1977).

Interest in Bem's predictions has continued. Offering an extrinsic reward (a coupon) for subjects to taste test a soft drink led to fewer internal attributions by these subjects for their own behavior (e.g., reports that they tried the product because of taste or curiosity) than for subjects not offered rewards (Scott and Yalch 1980). Similarly, respondents to a mail survey provided poorer quality data (e.g., shorter open-ended responses to questions) when given an incentive to respond (a quarter or a 25-cent pen) than when not given any incentive (Hansen 1980). Presumably, the extrinsic reward reduced intrinsic interest in answering the questionnaire, consistent with the discounting principle. It is somewhat surprising that these effects occur considering the trivial incentives.

Whereas the self-perception research reviewed by Mizerski et al. (1979) was generally content to demonstrate the effect, more recent studies examine the underlying processes and have found a number of limitations. According to Bem's theory, an extrinsic reward for product trial leads a consumer to infer external attributions for his or her behavior, and consequently to less liking for the product. But Scott and Yalch's (1980) self-perception experiment suggests that the opportunity to test hypotheses about one's behavior is essential to changing one's attitudes about a product. When evaluating new soft drinks, subjects sought information about the product to confirm their attributions. External rewards (coupons for tasting the drink) undermined liking for the product only after consumers were able to validate their hypotheses about their actions. Thus, consumers seek information to confirm their attributions before changing their attitudes.

The "taste-test" methodology has been used in other studies to explore the limits of self-perception theory. Tybout and Scott (1983) found that availability of well-defined internal knowledge mediates attitude formation. Subjects who had tasted a soft drink formed attitudes toward the drink by retrieving and evaluating stored information about the product. An extrinsic reward for choosing the product did not undermine liking for the product. However, liking for the product was undermined by the extrinsic reward when well-defined, internal data (a taste of the product) was unavailable. Then individuals observed their own behavior and judged their attitudes from it, consistent with Bem's predictions.

Other studies have explored self-labelling effects as a self-perception phenomenon. Labelling oneself as a certain type of person should lead consumers to behave consistently with that label. For example, a consumer embracing the conservationist label should behave in an energy-conserving manner. Allen (1982) compared the labelling effect to other persuasive appeals by presenting subjects with a variety of advertisements exhorting energy saving. An appeal labelling "the American consumer a willing participant in solving the energy problem" was more effective in influencing consumers' energy consumption cognitions than were other appeals, e.g., stressing personal and monetary gains from conservation (Allen 1982; Allen and Dillon 1983). Support for the labelling effect has also been found in a field experiment examining agreement to participate in a market research survey (Reingen and Bearden 1982). Respondents to a telephone survey told that "you are a very helpful person and I wish more of the people we call were as helpful as you are" were more likely to agree to participate in a subsequent mail survey than those not so labelled.

However, Tybout and Yalch (1980) maintain that self-perception theory by itself cannot explain how future behavior is influenced by past experience; it must be augmented by an understanding of how salience affects labelling. In an experiment in the political realm, salience of a label for one's behavior influenced voting. Registered voters told that their questionnaire responses indicated a high likelihood of voting were more likely to actually vote one week later than those told their responses indicated more "average" voting behavior. When subjects were distinguished on the basis of initial self-perceptions of being voters or nonvoters, the effect occurred only when the feedback was consistent with their self-schema (i.e., being a voter). Furthermore, the effect was short term, lasting only as long as the cue was salient. Thus, self-perception theory could not fully explain the results.

Whereas the previous research identifies a number of limitations of self-perception theory, the theory has suffered most damage in regard to the foot-in-the-door paradigm. The foot-in-the-door technique specifies that a small request is more likely to elicit compliance to a large request than if only the large request is made. According to self-perception theory predictions, the small favor should elicit greater compliance only when the target of the request perceives the self as the sort of person who complies to this sort of request. Typically, the foot-in-the-door effect has been tested in recent consumer research by examining compliance to requests to participate in market research surveys. Respondents given a brief telephone interview were asked to complete a mail questionnaire (Hansen and Robinson 1980). Subjects contacted by telephone were more...
likely to respond and to respond more quickly to the subsequent mail questionnaire (small request followed by large) than those not contacted by telephone first (large request only). When the requestor in a small request condition also explicitly encouraged the subject to engage in causal search, the large request elicited even greater compliance.

A similar study also found increased compliance with large requests when preceded by small requests (Allen et al. 1980). One small request condition asked for commitment to complete the second questionnaire (the large request), while another small request condition manipulated self-perception as well as gaining commitment. Allen et al. argued that the self-perception manipulation should have increased compliance over and above commitment, but both small favor conditions elicited similar levels of compliance.

More problematic than these results are null effects often found for the foot-in-the-door effect. Furse et al. (1981) found weak effects on compliance using the survey response paradigm. A meta-analysis of 120 tests of the foot-in-the-door effect also concluded that the effect on compliance is weak (Beaman et al. 1983), and an older review of this literature noted a surprising number of nonsignificant effects (DeJong 1979). Beaman et al. concluded that self-perception theory was, at best, only a partial explanation for the foot-in-the-door effect.

The most prominent explanation for the weak results is based on availability of issue relevant information in memory (Tybout, Sternthal, and Calder 1983). Basically, this explanation states that easy retrieval of information favorable to compliance facilitates compliance, whereas easy retrieval of information unfavorable to compliance hinders actual compliance. Prior notification of a subsequent mail survey increases response rates because acceptance of the initial request is more available and memorable than the more unfavorable information about the request. However, if escalation from a small request to a large request is more available than information about acceptance, then the small request can actually undermine compliance to the subsequent larger request. In the large-favor-only condition, lack of notification leads to availability of unfavorable information about complying to the request. Hence, if escalation from a small request to a large request is more available than information about acceptance, then the small request can actually undermine compliance to the subsequent larger request. In the large-favor-only condition, lack of notification leads to availability of unfavorable information about complying to the request. Hence, if escalation from a small request to a large request is more available than information about acceptance, then the small request can actually undermine compliance to the subsequent larger request.

In contrast, consumers often have incentives for maintaining unrealistic or inaccurate attributions. For example, the consumer can benefit from believing that a product is defective rather than accepting responsibility for product failure. Perhaps even more problematic for the consumer, the seller may have equally strong incentives for arguing the reverse. Studies conducted by Ross and his colleagues (Ross and Anderson 1982; Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard 1975) find considerable difficulty in changing attributions, even when information upon which the attribution is based is shown to be false.

It appears that once an attribution has become integral to an established belief structure, much greater evidence is required to falsify the inference than was required to create it. The malleability of consumers' attributions is an issue that warrants further research.

CONSEQUENCES OF CAUSAL ASCRIPtIONS

Whereas a distinction has been drawn between studies examining antecedents of causal inferences and those examining consequences of causal inferences, many studies examine both (Kelley and Michela 1980). For example, numerous studies manipulate beliefs about causes and examine attitudes, assuming attributions mediate the effects. Studies focusing on attributional consequences also manipulate antecedents, in the sense that research only manipulates information given to subjects and cannot directly influence or measure cognitions. However, studies of attributional consequences emphasize distinctions among various behaviors, intentions, and affects as a function of causal inferences (Weiner 1985a, 1986). Compared to the field when reviewed by Mizerski et al. (1979), the eighties have brought much more interest and progress in understanding consequences.
Consequences of Consumers’ Attributions

Typically, linkages between causes and consequences are made in terms of broad categories of causes, with the single most common distinction being between internal and external locations (see Weiner 1985a, 1986). For example, suppose a bottle of wine tastes bad. The location of the cause of the problem may reside with the consumer (e.g., the consumer stored the bottle in a hot place) or with the vintner (e.g., the vintner stored the bottle in a hot place). Conventionally, the former cause would be described as internal to the consumer while the latter would be external to the consumer.

When multiple causal agents play a role (e.g., a buyer and a seller), possible confusion over the internality of the cause has sometimes led the researcher to substitute such terms as buyer-related and seller-related (e.g., Folkes 1984b). The simple buyer/seller distinction may often capture consumers’ phenomenology; however, the consumer behavior expert more typically perceives multiple causal agents in the distribution chain. Increased complexity arises when distinguishing among more than two sources of causality, such as buyer-related, retailer-related, and wholesaler-related. Thus, the researcher is sometimes torn between capturing perceived causality and parsimony when determining whether to use a simple internal/external locus categorization or more complex categories.

The locus distinction is not always clear-cut either. Such that disagreement arises over categorization of causes (e.g., is a broker’s or agent’s action a seller-related cause or a buyer-related cause?). Similarly, in the persuasion literature, it is not always clear whether consumers perceive product endorsers and spokespersons rather than a firm or an advertising agency as the message source. Further, the central role of the internal/external distinction in attribution research has been criticized (e.g., Kruglanski 1975, 1982).

Some problems in classifying causes can be seen in a study aiming to manipulate consumers’ perceptions of locus of causality. Hunt, Kernan, and Mizerski (1983) suggested that competitive pressures from being a new, small firm with many rivals is an external factor compelling the company to use misleading advertising. But they found that consumers were equally distressed by deceptive advertising that led to a bad purchase decision when the firm advertised falsely due to these competitive pressures as when no pressures were present. Perhaps subjects believed that the appropriate response to competition is to provide a better product rather than to cheat consumers. Thus, they made internal rather than external attributions for the firm’s deceptive advertising. Clearly, care is necessary in classifying and manipulating causes.

Related to the locus dimension is the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for purchasing a product. A consumer may purchase a product because the purchase yields inherent satisfaction or to achieve some extrinsic goal (e.g., to use a coupon or to please the experimenter). The intrinsic/extrinsic distinction frequently occurs in studies of discounting and attitudes towards products. The self-perception studies described earlier suggest that providing extrinsic incentives for using a product decreases liking for the product.

Two other causal dimensions have been used in consumer research. Causes can be classified by the degree to which they are under volitional control (Weiner 1986). Consumers can perceive themselves and be perceived as controlling many aspects of consumption, but some events are due to uncontrollable causes (e.g., weather). Causes also differ in temporal stability. An event’s cause may be temporary and fluctuating or permanent and stable. Because locus, controllability, and stability are perceived as independent dimensions (Weiner 1986), they are often manipulated orthogonally in experimental designs.

Consequences Linked to Locus. Locus influences beliefs about who should solve problems; problems arising from consumers’ actions should be solved by consumers, whereas problems arising from firms’ actions should be solved by firms. Such beliefs may be related to the representativeness heuristic—the tendency to match reasons that are similar to or representative of the action to the action itself (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). In a survey of Salt Lake City households, those attributing the energy crisis to the general public favored the public solving the problem by such actions as voluntary conservation, whereas those attributing the energy crisis to the oil companies more strongly favored government pressure on oil companies as a solution (Belk, Painter, and Semenik 1981). Another survey found that respondents who blamed individuals for polluting the air and littering the environment identified these individuals as responsible for solving the problems (Belk and Painter 1983). When other sources of the problems were identified, they were generally held responsible for solutions. Similarly, locus of causality influences whether consumers believe a firm should provide a refund and an apology for product failure (Folkes 1984b). When product failure is seller-related, firms owe consumers refunds and apologies; when product failure is consumer-related, firms are not obligated to provide redress.

A number of studies relate locus to product satisfaction. Oliver and DeSarbo (1988) manipulated locus of causality in an experiment. Investors’ successful stock purchases resulting from external causes (the broker’s research and recommendation) led to more satisfaction with the broker compared to internal causes (the investor’s research and decision). Netherlands’ consumers who felt seller-related causes played some role in their problem experienced more product dissatisfaction than those not detecting seller-related causes (Richins 1985). A survey of 261 U.S. consumers reporting a recent product dissatisfaction collected information about
their attributions for the problem, how extensively they engaged in negative word-of-mouth with other consumers about the product, and whether they complained to the firm. External attributions led to more criticism than did internal attributions (Richins 1983).

Except for Folkes (1984b), the empirical research cited above and earlier research (e.g., Valle and Koese 1977; Valle and Wallendorf 1977) distinguish causes only in terms of locus. Yet causes have additional properties or dimensions that could influence these same behaviors. Unless these dimensions are explicitly included in the research, misleading conclusions about the influence of locus may result. For example, the product satisfaction literature shows that controllability and locus influence consumers’ desires to engage in word-of-mouth communications with other consumers and to communicate to firms about products (Curren and Folkes 1987).

Consequences Linked to Controllability. Causes also differ in controllability over outcomes; for some actions a consumer “could have done otherwise” and so had volitional control over an outcome, while at other times the situation forces or constrains the consumer to follow a certain course of action (Weiner 1985a). Evaluation of product hazard may be related to consumers’ control over problems. Risks people voluntarily assume (e.g., snow skiing) are perceived as more acceptable than those perceived as imposed by firms (Rethans and Albbaum 1980).

Firms can also be perceived as having varying amounts of control over their actions. For example, passengers perceive airline personnel problems such as slow baggage handling to be more firm-controllable reasons for flight delays than mechanical problems (Folkes, Koletsy, and Graham 1987). Research has primarily examined how consumers’ perceptions of firms’ control (external locus) influence consumers’ evaluations. Controllability influences willingness to communicate with others about product success (Curren and Folkes 1987). When consumers perceive product success to be controlled by the firm (e.g., a dry cleaning service removes stains because of the firm’s efforts to diagnose the problem), they are more willing to compliment the firm and to recommend the product to others than when situational constraints dictate the firm’s actions (e.g., the dry cleaning service’s standard formula happens to remove this stain). Conversely, product failure controlled by the firm increases the desire to complain to the firm and warn others against product purchase than if product failure is not controlled by the firm.

Controllability also influences consumer anger over product failure (Folkes 1984b). Consumers express more anger over product failure when the firm had volitional control over a problem (e.g., a repair was not ready on time due to the shop’s carelessness) than when the firm lacked control over the problem (e.g., a repair was not ready on time due to a power failure in the area). Firm controlled attributions increase the consumer’s desire to hurt the firm’s business. Affective reactions appear to mediate the relationship between attributions and some consumer responses (cf. Weiner 1985a, 1986). Delayed airline passengers who believed that flight delay was controllable by the airline felt angrier at the airline than those who believed the delay was uncontrollable (Folkes et al. 1987). Anger, in turn, influenced passengers’ desires to complain about a problem to the airline and willingness to fly the same airline again.

Consequences Linked to Stability. Another causal dimension investigated in consumer behavior studies is temporal stability (stable and permanent causes versus unstable and temporary causes). Stability influences expectancies such that stable causes for an outcome lead to more confidence that the same outcome will recur than do unstable outcomes (Weiner 1986). In research manipulating causal locus, controllability, and stability, unstable causes led consumers to change expectancies for product failure. Thus, when products fail for stable reasons, e.g., the dishwasher stops because the product is defective or because the consumer never scrapes food off before filling the dishwasher, the consumer is more certain the product will fail again than when due to unstable reasons, e.g., the refrigerator stops because of a power failure or because the consumer forgot to plug it in after cleaning (Folkes 1984b).

Stability influences the type of redress preferred when a product fails; compared to unstable reasons, stable attributions lead consumers to more strongly prefer refunds rather than exchanges. However, locus also affects redress. Preference for refunds increases when products fail for firm-related reasons as opposed to consumer-related reasons.

Causal Dimensions and Product Performance. In sum, causes for service and product performance can be classified by locus, stability, and controllability. Sometimes consequences of attributions are linked to a single causal dimension, e.g., consumers believe refunds are owed when problems arise due to firm-related reasons but not for consumer-related reasons (Folkes 1984b). For other consequences, more dimensions are involved. For example, locus, controllability, and stability influence how consumers communicate about products, with successful performance due to firm-controlled and stable causes leading to the greatest desire to recommend the product to friends and to compliment the firm (Curren and Folkes 1987). In contrast to the research reviewed by Mizerski et al. (1979), research classifying causes by several causal dimensions identifies distinct responses (e.g., expectancies for product performance, anger at the firm), as opposed to merely valence of the response (e.g., a more positive response toward the product).
Although progress has been made in elucidating consequences of attributions for product performance, these relationships require further elaboration. Other affects, such as pity, surprise, and regret, may mediate relationships between attributions and behavioral responses. For example, greater pity for victims of birth defects, famine, and crime than for those of seemingly more controllable outcomes (e.g., alcoholism) may lead consumers to contribute less money to charities helping the latter (Weiner 1986).

It is particularly important to clarify the relationship between attributions and decision making. Attributions have often been studied as a postpurchase phenomenon. Complex inferences about product attributes are initiated after products are selected. Attributions probably also play an important role at the beginning of the decision making process. Problem recognition must often entail causal inferences, inferences which then limit the kinds of solutions considered by consumers. For example, many advertisements for personal care products try to portray personal rejection as due to some offensive property of the consumer (e.g., the consumer's need for an effective deodorant). The consumer who accepts this definition of his or her problem will search for different solutions more so than someone who attributes romantic rejection to being unlucky in love. Thus, consumers' attributions can guide and define decision making.

Consequences of Attributions for Sales Performance

A relatively new stream of research that should be briefly mentioned examines salespersons' causal inferences for sales. Because most of these studies also use Weiner's (1986) framework they address some issues described earlier. However, they link specific causes to evaluations of and expectancies for sales.

Consistent with previous research, the stability dimension influences expectancies for salespersons' success (Anderson 1983). Despite this support for Weiner's theory, some research has been interpreted as contradicting the theory. In two studies (Anand and Stern 1985; Mowen et al. 1985), marketers seemed to perceive effort as a stable cause, in contrast to early theorizing by Weiner et al. (1972) that suggested it is an unstable cause. Indeed, Weiner (1985a, 1986) changed his categorization system to include stable and unstable effort, pointing out the importance of assessing the subject's phenomenology when classifying causes. Controllability is another recent development in Weiner's classification system not taken into account in many salesperson motivation studies.

Whereas most of the previously described studies manipulate causal perceptions, a few studies examine how attributional styles influence salespersons' motivation and behavior. Predispositions to make certain attributions lead some salespersons to work harder after failure experiences; others perform worse or change selling strategies (Anderson 1983; Sujan 1986). Sujan's work emphasizes an important distinction in changeable causes (effort and strategy) and their behavioral consequences (intensity and change in direction). Salespersons who attributed poor sales to a bad strategy adopted new techniques (changed direction), whereas attributions to low effort led to intentions to work longer hours (increased intensity).

Attributional styles have also been examined from a learned helplessness framework. A person who habitually makes internal, stable, and global attributions in the face of repeated failure will display lowered self-esteem and fewer response initiatives (Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale 1978). Globality refers to the extent to which a cause generalizes beyond the present situation or is specific to the immediate situation. Noting that life insurance salespersons face repeated rejections, Seligman and Schulman (1986) found that those who had "pessimistic" explanatory styles (internal, stable, and global attributions for negative life events) were more likely to sell less insurance and then to quit their jobs than those with more "optimistic" styles (external, unstable, and specific). Whereas consumer behavior researchers may be tempted to apply these concepts to consumers, they should also be aware of articles critical of this line of research (e.g., Cutrona, Russell, and Jones 1984; Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn 1984).

In sum, an attributional approach to understanding sellers' behaviors is quite promising. Attributional concepts have been incorporated into theories of salesperson motivation (Tcas and McElroy 1986; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986) and, more generally, organizational behavior (e.g., Green and Linden 1980; Mitchell, Green, and Wood 1981; Porac, Nottenburg, and Eggert 1981). But future research needs to clarify implications of causal inferences for such issues as sales projections, sales training, personnel compensation, and employee turnover—marketing decisions that impinge on consumers.

OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With the review of research since the Mizerski et al. (1979) article complete, we should now step back and get a better sense of the scope and direction of the field. Many of the issues discussed in the present article have been debated since the mid-seventies. Yet, some new research streams have emerged.

Current Issues in Attribution Research

Mizerski et al. (1979) placed emphasis on four major attribution theories: Heider (1958), Kelley (1967, 1973), Bem (1972), and Jones and Davis (1965). Heider provided the seminal concepts for theories about causal
inferences; more recently published writings also display
the wealth of his insights (Benesh and Weiner 1982).
However, Kelley's theories have provided the starting
point for much more of the empirical work. Kelley's
covariation theory and discounting principle, in par-
ticular, stimulated research reviewed by Mizerski et al.,
as well as recent work in marketing (e.g., Lichtenstein
and Bearden 1986; Yalch and Yoshida 1983).
In the seventies, predictions from Bem's self-percep-
tion theory were often pitted against those of cognitive
dissonance theory, but interest in this controversy has
greatly declined without being clearly resolved in favor
of either theory. Because many major issues in self-per-
ception theory have been addressed, future research is
likely to be concerned with refinements (e.g., Tybout
and Scott 1983; Tybout et al. 1983). Although Bem's
self-perception theory has attracted decreased interest,
a related position articulated by Nisbett and Wilson
(1977) has generated considerable controversy (e.g.,
Kellogg 1982; Wegner and Vallacher 1986). Nisbett and
Wilson's initial position—that individuals lack access
to the cognitive processes influencing their behavior—
seems to have been too extreme. Finally, Jones and
Davis's correspondent inference theory has stimulated
relatively little research both within and outside of con-
sumer behavior (but see Kamins and Assael 1987; Miz-
erski 1982).
These four major attribution theories and most at-
tribution research view people as naive scientists, care-
fully gathering data upon which to make a causal in-
ference. Recent investigators have sometimes conceived
of a much less industrious information processor, a
'cognitive economizer' (e.g., Hansen 1985). Also in con-
trast to the early research, which emphasized data-
driven or bottom-up information-processing strategies
when arriving at causal inferences, more recent ap-
proaches have emphasized conceptually driven or top-
down strategies (e.g., Hastie 1983). For example, Leddo,
Abelson, and Gross (1984) have been highly critical of
Kelley's models, suggesting that a "knowledge struc-
ture" approach better describes how people explain
events. People arrive at causes by first finding an ap-
propriate schema for the event, then comparing the
event to the information contained in the schema. For
example, consumers may hold the belief that large firms
care little about individual consumers. When encoun-
tering a large firm's poor service, the consumer fits the
firm's actions to this belief rather than compare expe-
riences with large and small firms. If Leddo et al. are
correct, changing consumers' attributions will entail
changing "knowledge structures" or modifying the fit
between schema and incident, rather than providing
information. Along this line, some consumer behavior
research has examined when people form hypotheses
about the cause of an event, which they then test against
data (e.g., Scott and Yalch 1980).
During the seventies and eighties, a common research
approach has been to compare normative models of
attributional inferences against actual causal inferences.
Departures from the ideal are generally described as
biases, such as the fundamental attribution error—the
tendency to make person attributions rather than situ-
tional attributions for another's behavior (e.g., Ross
1977, but see also Funder 1987), underuse of consensus
information (e.g., Borgida and Brekke 1981; Kassin
1979) and the self-serving bias (e.g., Bradley 1978;
Miller 1978) . Interest in attributional biases is also evi-
dent in recent consumer behavior research (e.g., Folkes
Researchers remain interested in identifying biases,
some of which are clearly relevant for consumer be-
behavior. Consider the group attribution error—the
inference that group members from the decision made by the group, regardless of how the de-
cision was arrived at (Allison and Messick 1985). Con-
sumers may infer that employees implementing a policy
mandated by top management also agree with those
policies. Thus, a disgruntled consumer may assume that
a customer service representative denying a refund per-
suade the complaint handler to change policies and
hold the complaint handler personally responsi-
ble for lack of redress.
Even in the case of self-serving attributions,
the source of attributional biases has often been identified
using concepts from cognitive psychology, such as
memory, ease of processing, and perceptual salience.
Cognitive psychology has increasingly provided the im-
petus for theory development. For example, Einhorn
and Hogarth (1986) have approached attributions from
a decision-making framework, noting that people often
make judgments about the probable or likely cause of
an event. Their analysis suggests yet another way to
understand the often studied discounting effect in con-
sumer behavior. Research in text comprehension and
scripts suggests hypotheses about how people make
causal inferences in complex scenarios (Read 1987).
Because many commercials require viewers to make
inferences about characters' intentions and goals, this
sort of analysis should provide guidelines for under-
standing advertising effects.
Although attribution theory focuses on cognitive
processes, interest in consequences of causal inferences
has always been strong. Recently most progress has been
made in identifying attributions' effects on consumers'
responses to product problems (e.g., Richins 1983). A
trend emerging since the Mizerski et al. (1979) review,
but with roots in early attributional investigations (e.g.,
Schachter 1964), is research on how causal inferences
for an outcome influence the type of affective reaction
that the outcome (e.g., Weiner 1986). This approach has
received relatively little attention in consumer behavior,
with the exception of some research on attributions for
product failure and consumers' anger (Folkes 1984b:
Folkes et al. 1987).
Yet, emotions play an important role in consumption behavior. For example, receiving a gift may give rise not only to knowledge that one is obligated to reciprocate but also feelings of gratitude (Weiner 1986). These feelings may motivate subsequent actions, as well as enhance or even change the nature of the relationship between giver and recipient. A woman who attributes a gift of flowers to romantic attraction will have a different relationship with the giver than if she believes the gift is a sympathy gesture for illness.

Consider the emotions of pride and embarrassment in consumption situations. A consumer may feel great pride in a purchase when attributing the price paid to skilled negotiating, while another consumer might attribute the same price to negotiating ineptitude and so feel embarrassed (cf. Weiner 1986). These feelings may, in turn, influence subsequent behavior. Pride would logically lead to boasting about the purchase while embarrassment might generate reticence to discuss the purchase. Thus attributions might, through their effects on pride and shame, influence the diffusion of product information.

Although attribution theory cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of affective life, causal inferences do have an important role in what Smith and Ellsworth (1987) have termed appraisal theories of emotions. Further, many consumption activities may be motivated by a naive analysis of the effects of emotions. For example, an individual may believe that an ice cream cone or a glass of wine will cheer him or her up (Weiner et al. 1987). An interesting line of research would explore the nature and source of such beliefs.

As noted in this review, most attribution research examines antecedents and consequences of causal inferences. Other fundamental issues receive less attention. One important line of research has examined factors instigating causal search (e.g., Hastie 1984; Weiner 1985b). Unexpected and negative events are more likely to generate attributional activity. Uncertainty about one’s feelings toward a product seems to motivate consumers to engage in causal analysis (Scott 1981). Other research has examined how causal inferences differ from other kinds of inferences, e.g., Locksley and Stangor’s (1984) work on “how” versus “why” questions. Consumer researchers will probably want to follow up on Wilson and Dunn’s (1986) finding that attitudes toward usage of products differ depending on whether users introspect about reasons for their attitudes towards products or their feelings about products.

An Assessment of the Theory

This overview merely highlights recent trends in this vast field, necessarily omitting some research streams (for more extensive reviews, see Harvey and Weary 1984, 1985; Kelley and Michela 1980; Ross and Fletcher 1985; Weiner 1986). Even this brief summary shows that attribution theory has not remained stagnant but has expanded its scope while refining basic issues. Often times attributional concepts have spurred the researcher to examine more general processes. For example, Nisbett and Ross’s (1980) interest in attributional biases evolved into a larger concern with human judgment processes.

In contrast to the past explosive growth of research in the field, the theory has now settled down to a respectable middle age. Most of the basic theoretical issues have been delineated. Most of the original theories are in the refinement stage. Many controversies have been resolved or declared unsolvable. Past research is so extensive that a contribution to the field typically requires the investigator to acquire considerable sophistication in the field. Nevertheless, as indicated by the present review, attribution theory is certainly not on its death bed as a paradigm. Attributional concepts will have a long lasting impact. People do make causal attributions; these causal inferences have important consequences.

Directions for Attribution Research in Consumer Behavior

Turning more specifically to the development of attribution theory in consumer behavior, one sees uneven growth. Many areas, such as research examining self-perception theory, have considerable maturity and suggest limited horizons in terms of future research. Some earlier work has not received the follow-up it deserves. For example, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) found important differences in children’s ability to infer the intent of advertisers behind commercials, but consumer researchers have not pursued these sorts of developmental differences.

Other issues of interest to consumer researchers have received surprisingly little attention. For example, the absence of extrinsic incentives influences a person’s defining an activity as leisure or recreation (e.g., Lepper and Green 1978), yet this distinction receives little attention in the consumer behavior literature. Causal inferences influence the extent to which people tolerate crowded and noisy environments (e.g., Darley and Gilbert 1985), but little research has examined shopping and consumption environments from this perspective.

Attributional concepts are relevant to a variety of other issues important to consumer researchers. Causal inferences may influence consumers’ perceptions of prices. Consumers may perceive price increases due to reasons uncontrollable by the firm (e.g., higher costs of raw materials) as more legitimate than price increases due to controllable reasons (e.g., the firm’s desire for higher profits). Citizens’ demands for governmental price controls may arise from such perceptions. Additionally, consumers’ willingness to purchase generic or “plain wrap” products may depend on causal inferences for lower prices charged for these products. Evaluations of warranties may depend partly on causal inferences.
for why the warranty is offered. On the one hand, people may infer that a firm offers a warranty because of confidence the product will not fail. The warranty will cost the firm nothing. On the other hand, people may infer the firm anticipates problems with the product that they will be obligated to remedy anyway.

Causal inferences may play an important role in buyer-seller interactions. Negotiation tactics may depend on inferences for why the other is making an offer. A buyer makes a different counteroffer when attributing the seller's initial high-priced offer to confidence in demand for the seller's product as opposed to a desperate need for funds. Meta-attributions may also be important here; negotiators may try to infer what the other will infer about offers. An interesting avenue for research would determine how people arrive at these sorts of inferences.

Considering the multiple consequences of attributions for product failure, it is easy to see how buyer-seller conflict may focus on causal inferences for an outcome (Folkes 1984a; Folkes and Kotsos 1986). If buyers and sellers disagree about causes of product failure, they may consequently disagree about whether refunds are owed, what product performance should be expected, and whether the consumer should be angry about the problem. On the other hand, when buyers and sellers are in conflict over an outcome, excuses, justifications, and explanations for events are ways of maintaining, protecting, and building relationships between buyers and sellers (e.g., Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky 1980; Weiner et al. 1987).

Attributional concepts can be used to understand nutrition, health, and safety issues. For example, consumers probably have naive models of how food intake promotes health. A simple, "graded effects" causal schema (Kelley 1972) that assumes causes that have beneficial consequences in small quantities will have even larger beneficial consequences in large quantities may be responsible for the common vitamin overdose problem. Beliefs about what causes and what cures illness probably influence when consumers decide they should see a physician and patient compliance with physicians' recommendations. In sum, attributional approaches can shed light on a variety of consumer behavior issues.

CONCLUSION

The introduction to this review noted that attribution theory has had relatively little impact on the field of consumer behavior. Moreover, some have expressed doubt over the value of this approach to our discipline. As recently as 1980, a newly elected fellow in the Association for Consumer Research reported he was "glad . . . to see the advocates of attribution theory challenged to show what, if anything, it has contributed to existing knowledge" (Engel 1980). The research reviewed here clearly shows causal inferences influence a variety of important consumer responses, as well as those whose actions impinge on consumers, such as salespersons.

Yet, attributional concepts have been underutilized. One reason may be that the relevance of some issues central to the theory has not been obvious. For example, causal inferences to personal dispositions have been a central topic in attribution research but have less importance for consumer behavior. Another reason may be that some studies examining consumer behavior present themselves as testing attributional principles and do not explicitly recognize their relevance to the field of consumer behavior. For example, this article reviewed studies investigating consumers' tendency to assume a false consensus for their preferences, a controversial issue in attribution theory. The issue has not been addressed in consumer behavior publications, but has been examined in psychology journals. These studies rarely mention the word "consumer." Although one is tempted to speculate on other causes for attribution theory's relative lack of influence, one reason that can be ruled out is that attribution theory has little to offer.

[Received May 1987. Revised August 1987.]

REFERENCES


Fern, Edward F., Kent B. Monroe, and Ramon A. Avila (1986), "Effectiveness of Multiple Request Strategies: A Synthesis of Research Results," Journal of Marketing Research, 23 (May), 144-152.


Kellogg, Ronald T. (1982), "When Can We Introspect Accurately About Mental Processes?" *Memory and Cognition*, 10 (March), 141–144.


Oliver, Richard L. and Wayne S. DeSarbo (1988), "Response


Tybout, Alice M. and Carol A. Scott (1983). “Availability of Well-Defined Internal Knowledge and the Attitude For-


