ATTRIBUTION
BIAS/ERROR

Attribution comes from the world of social psychology and refers to how we make sense (or judge) how people behave. Seldom touched on in counselling training, attribution can have a real impact on how we interact with each other.

Take this situation: your client is always late for appointments and wants to leave early as time goes on. You find yourself thinking, *'This client does not want to be in therapy. If they did, they would turn up on time and stay!'*

This thinking is referred to as **dispositional** (a.k.a. internal) **attribution**.

In other words, you consider your client's lateness as part of their character—they don't really want to be there and cannot be bothered. As time goes on, you look for evidence to support your thinking.

For example, during one session, you notice they keep glancing at their watch. This reinforces your belief that your client has better things do than be in therapy.

The fascinating *(and worrying)* aspect of dispositional attribution is that we actively look for evidence to support our beliefs that people's character is to blame for their behaviour.

Later, in supervision, you are speaking about your frustrations with the client.

You supervisor points out that perhaps their lateness may be down to something else, something to do with their circumstances such as child care or transport difficulties.

Your supervisor's thinking could be summed up as **situational** (a.k.a. external) **attribution**. In other words, the client's lateness and eagerness to leave may have something to do with their circumstances, not their character.

Research points out that we have a tendency to use dispositional attribution most of the time when situational attribution may be more appropriate. This is referred to as **attribution error/bias**.

Humans have a tendency to believe that human behaviour is more about someone's character rather than it being shaped by external events.

This attribution error tends to be very widespread, particularly among individualistic cultures.

Want to know more about attribution?

Google:

- Heider's "Common Sense" Theory
- Correspondent Inference Theory

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