

Commentary:

**MY SITUATION PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE
FORMATION OF MY CONCLUSIONS: A REPLY TO
WAGERMAN'S FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENT**

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Abstract

Wagerman's (2015; see this present issue of JISS) commentary "A *Fundamental Disagreement about the Fundamental Attribution Error, Or: The Situation Made him Write it*" of my (2015; see this present issue of JISS) article "*Explanations and Implications of the Fundamental Attribution Error: A Review and Proposal*" questions the validity of points made in the paper because 1) of the controversy over whether the *fundamental attribution error* (FAE) exists, 2) whether it works in the manner that social psychologists suggest it does, and 3) whether it is fruitful to distinguish between dispositions and situational factors of behavior. Careful examination of my original paper will show that I have addressed both points 1 and 2 (see Berry, 2015, pp. 46 & 50–51). And since Wagerman didn't express issues with how I addressed points 1 and 2 in the paper, I will focus on point 3. In what follows I intend to critique several points Wagerman made in his commentary, evaluate his proposed explanation for the occurrence of the FAE, and show how there is more commonality between us than he suggests.

Keywords: Fundamental attribution error, social psychology, attribution, availability heuristic, hypersensitive agency detection device

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COMMENTARY

Wagerman's (2015; see this issue of JISS) commentary of my paper has allowed me to think critically about my proposed explanation of the *fundamental attribution error* (FAE). Yet, I take issue with a few of the suggestions he makes. First, Wagerman states that one of the reasons he's not a great fan of the FAE is because he's a personality psychologist. He clarifies this statement by stating that social psychologists put a great deal of stock into the FAE because it reveals the importance of situational factors on behavior over dispositions, suggesting that social psychologists believe that situational factors are better explanations for behavior than dispositions (p. 59). It is difficult to know whether social psychologists think that situations are more important explanations of behavior. Social psychologists tend to emphasize situational explanations for behavior over dispositional explanations. It is unclear, however, whether social psychologists emphasize situational explanations for behavior over dispositional explanations because they believe situational factors are more important explanations of behavior or because observers tend to downplay situational factors when explaining behavior.

It is also unclear whether Wagerman's statement refers to social psychologist's *conventional view* of behavior or *ultimate view* of behavior (by ultimate view I am referring to the way things really are and by conventional view I am referring to the way things appear to be). Admittedly, as an aspiring social psychologist, I tend to think that situations are ultimately more important explanations of behavior because I am inclined to maintain that human beings have little control over their behavior in an ultimate sense. However, it seems apparent to me that we are able to modify and control our behavior at the conventional level of reality. Thus I am reluctant to hold the position that situational factors are better explanations for behavior than dispositional factors. Understanding this distinction is important, because a person could maintain that situational factors are ultimately more important but conventionally less important than dispositions. Thus their answer to the question, "are situational factors or dispositions more important explanations for behavior" will depend upon the view of reality being evaluated. This missing distinction adds to the lacking clarity of whether or not Wagerman's claim is true.

Wagerman suggests that dispositions may carry more weight than situational factors when assessing how behavior is changed. Though I don't think this is true, dispositions doubtless carry weight in changing behavior. Wagerman references a question asked by Funder and Fast (2010) in an attempt to portray the influence that dispositions have on behavior in contrast to situational factors: how successful are our attempts to change a friend's political standpoint, a spouse's dishwashing habits, or a child's clinginess? As a proponent of the FAE, my response is: as successful as the approach is appropriate for the targeted person(s). For a young child, their clinginess may be best dealt with through negative reinforcement. A friend's political standpoint, however, might be best dealt with by entering their frame of reference and offering them an unfamiliar

perspective for why someone might hold a different political standpoint. Behavioral change requires an approach that evaluates both the person and their situation in order to yield change. Wagerman's point is to further distance himself from the proposition that situational explanations are more important than dispositions. Though I don't disagree with Wagerman, I think he goes too far when ascribing a qualitative judgment to a group of psychologists without further clarification of his proposition.

Second, I take issue with the conclusions that Wagerman draws from his anecdotal example (pp. 59–60). I am not convinced that Wagerman's $N = 1$ anecdote portrays my conclusions in a negative light. Nor am I convinced that his anecdote supports my claims in the manner he believes it does. Wagerman claims that his example of the FAE (an indirect example of the FAE; see p. 59) suggests that neither educating people on the FAE nor increasing attributional complexity may have the ameliorative effects I suggest they do (Berry, 2015, pp. 53-54). Careful examination of his anecdote, however, has illuminated a different conclusion. That is, the doctoral student who was accused of committing the FAE lacked attributional complexity. It is apparent that the doctoral student lacked attributional complexity because of their failure to understand the accusation and—as is implied in Wagerman's anecdote—unwillingness to investigate their own behavior to yield a lucid understanding of their behavior. I don't doubt that these doctoral students in social psychology have a good understanding of the FAE. But the behavior of the graduate student who still hasn't spoken to their colleague since the fallout does not portray the quality of attributional complexity (see Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986).

However, Wagerman's anecdote does provide information worth thinking about further—an implication of the anecdote I am grateful to have received. Wagerman's anecdote suggests that understanding the FAE in isolation of attributional complexity may not be enough to mitigate the effects of the FAE. As the anecdote portrays, a robust understanding of the FAE is not enough to mitigate the effects of the FAE, even when it is an indirect occurrence of the FAE. Thus, a person who understands the FAE may also need attributional complexity in order to mitigate the effects of the FAE.

Another component of Wagerman's commentary worth discussing in detail is his proposed explanation for the occurrence of the FAE. He proposes that the *availability heuristic* may account for the over-dispositional judgments observers make of actors in situations. The availability heuristic refers to judgments made using information that comes to the mind with ease (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Wagerman believes that the tendency we have to attribute dispositions to the cause of behavior may be due to the type of available information that informs our behavioral judgment. For example, he remarks that it may be the case that we attribute the cause of a car being wrapped around a telephone pole to the dispositions of the driver because of the number of times we have heard about or seen a driver being responsible for wrapping their car around a tree. In this particular case, more instances of reckless, careless, or irresponsible driving may come to mind than instances in which the condition of the vehicle or road played a key role in the accident.

To Wagerman's credit, I can recount more times that I have heard of an accident caused by a reckless or irresponsible driver when compared to the number of times I can recount hearing about or seeing a car accident caused by the conditions of the road or vehicle. But, this could be because we are more likely to hear about accidents where the driver is at fault because it is bigger news than an accident caused by the conditions of the vehicle or road. And if we assign dispositions to being the cause of the event merely because dispositional information is more available.

Wagerman's proposed explanation for the FAE seems as though it could be functioning in congruence with the hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD) rather than in contrast to it. My proposal suggests that the HADD may cause us to focus on an actor in an environment and hence attribute dispositions to the cause of the event without properly examining the external factors in the situation. Though Wagerman tries to offer an explanation that moves away from the HADD, I believe that both explanations may play a role in forming behavioral judgments.

The HADD could be used to explain the type of information available to the observer when making a behavioral judgment of an actor. If it is the case that observers make behavioral judgments that overestimate the role of dispositions because of the information available to the observer at the time of the judgment, then it is likely the case that the available information is dispositional because of the HADD's detection of agency. When the HADD detects an agent in an event the information that becomes available to the observer is primarily dispositional. The available information thus leads the observer to make a behavioral judgment that overestimates the role of dispositions while simultaneously failing to adequately examine potential external influences—an occurrence of the FAE.

If shown to be empirically valid, the HADD would detect agency in a situation prior to the formation of a behavioral judgment. Once agency has been detected, information would become available that would lead to behavioral judgments. The available information may be primarily dispositional because the HADD causes the agent to stand out amongst the various situational factors.

The third component of Wagerman's commentary I take issue with is his belief that his proposed explanation for the cause of the FAE has "the benefit of cleaving a bit closer to Occam's Razor" (p. 60). Interestingly, it seems to me as though my explanation of the HADD—if empirically verified—would doubtless find itself more closely in line with Occam's Razor than Wagerman's proposal. Wagerman proposes that observers may overestimate dispositions when making behavioral judgments because of the availability heuristic. My proposal may explain the reasons for having dispositional information readily available to begin with, and thus align more closely with Occam's Razor than Wagerman's proposal. Regardless, Wagerman states in the next paragraph that it is dangerous to discuss human thinking in such simple terms, thus rendering his explanation's quasi-simplicity meaningless. Why would it matter whether his explanation cleaves closer to Occam's

Razor if he thinks that human being's mechanisms for thought and attribution are complex? This contradiction leaves me wondering whether he thinks that we should consult Occam's Razor when evaluating explanations of human behavior or forget about it because of the complex nature of the process of human thinking.

It seems to me that Wagerman and I find common ground when thinking about the criteria for explaining human behavior. Though my situation played a key role in forming the conclusions I made in my paper, I maintain that I am culpable for these conclusions. At the conventional level of reality, it seems apparent to me that both situations and dispositions must be evaluated in order to form an accurate behavioral judgment. Dispositions are a great explanatory tool for behavioral judgments. But there is a danger in isolating the actor's dispositions when evaluating the behavior. So when we immediately detect the cause of behavior as being driven by dispositions, we must pause to examine the influence that external factors may have had on the behavior to make an accurate behavioral judgment.

Situational factors play an important role in determining both the legal and moral status of human beings. For example, a person who watches a car speed up as a young girl crosses the street might immediately think that the driver possesses the intent to kill the girl. However, it could be the case that the driver is an old man who had a heart attack rendering him incapable of controlling the movement of his foot. It just so happened, then, that as the girl crossed the street the old man's foot uncontrollably applied pressure to the gas pedal. This uncontrollable movement thus gave the scene an appearance of murder, when it is in fact an example of manslaughter.

This case demonstrates the importance of understanding the influence of external factors on behavior before making a behavioral judgment. This is not to say that situational factors are more important or serve as better explanations than dispositions. Rather, it is to say that it is important to understand both the situational and dispositional explanations of behavior. Explanations that fail to assess dispositions and situational factors run the risk of forming inaccurate behavioral judgments. Thus, I think Wagerman would agree that if we are inclined to attribute dispositions to the cause of behavior without examining potential situational factors then it is important to assess this tendency in hopes of finding ways to obviate it. If research on the FAE may help in our exploration of human behavior, then by all means what Wagerman calls "unfruitful" may be better called a research worthy of pursuit.

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