In addition, some participants were told that the essay writer had been given no choice as to which position to take, whereas other participants were told the essay writer was free to choose either position. Finally, participants were asked to predict the essay writer’s true attitude toward Castro (10 = Very negative; 70 = Very positive). This judgment was intended to assess the extent to which participants drew a dispositional inference from the essayist’s behavior.

Before considering the results from this investigation, let’s examine the predictions correspondent inference theory makes in this situation. As shown on the left-hand side of Figure 4.2, correspondent inference theory predicts that participants will infer the person’s attitude in the choice condition: A person who freely chooses to write a pro-Castro essay must really like Castro and a person who freely chooses to write an anti-Castro essay must really dislike Castro. How could it be otherwise? No one made the person write the essay, so the position taken must reflect the essayist’s true attitude. The situation is quite different in the no-choice condition. Here, participants should refrain from making any judgment about the essayist’s true attitudes. The behavior was coerced, so it doesn’t reveal anything about the writer’s attitude. In the language of the theory, the participants should discount the extent to which the position taken reflects the essayist’s true attitude, because coercion provides a strong situational explanation.

Inspection of the right-hand side of Figure 4.2 reveals that these predictions were only partially confirmed. In accordance with the theory, participants in the choice condition did infer that a person who wrote a pro-Castro essay had more favorable attitudes toward Castro than a person who wrote an anti-Castro essay. However, this was also true in the no-choice condition. The effect was less pronounced, but even when told the writer had no choice as to which position to argue, participants assumed that a person who wrote a pro-Castro essay had more positive attitudes toward Castro than did a person who wrote an anti-Castro essay. In short, participants gave insufficient weight to whether the essayist was free to choose which side of the issue to argue; they failed to discount as much as they should.

The tendency to underestimate the importance of situational causes and overestimate the importance of dispositional ones is known as the fundamental attribution