

# The Fundamental Attribution Error

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## Concept

The fundamental attribution error, also called the correspondence bias, describes the tendency for observer's to attribute other people's behavior to internal or dispositional factors and to downplay situational causes (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

Every day people make causal explanations for their own and others' behavior, as well as for events in general. These explanations, or attributions, are a crucial form of information processing that help explain the situations and behavior occurring in the world around us (Kazdin, 2000). Psychologists have come up with multiple attribution theories to describe the different ways people use various pieces of information when trying to explain particular events. According to research, humans actively engage in attribution methods because they have an innate desire to understand, predict, and control what's going on around them (Forgas, 1998). In doing so, people's ability to know, and, in some ways, control the social world around them is enhanced.

When determining what caused a particular event the observer focuses on either the internal or external factors that are present. The personality, abilities, and traits of the person involved are all classified as internal while environmental constraints, other people's actions, and properties of the situation are external (Reeder, 1982). Most of the time, when trying to explain what happens in social settings, people tend to view the behavior of the actor, or person involved in the situation, as an extremely significant factor. As a result, observers tend to explain behavior in terms of the actors internal disposition rather than the external situational factors (Kazdin, 2000).

This inclination to over exaggerate the influence of behavior, personality traits, motives, etc. and underestimate the power of external factors in a given situation is known as the fundamental attribution error or FAE (Amabile, Ross, and Steinmetz, 1977). The fundamental attribution error has been studied and observed in real-life

situations as well as psychology experiments. Researchers have determined a few explanations for the occurrence of the FAE however, its causes and consequences remain poorly understood (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

Often, attributional errors are a result of the cognitive strategies used to simplify and easily process the information of the complex world (Forgas, 1998). People are cognitive misers and when assessing the causal factors of a situation they frequently prefer quick and easy answers rather than exerting more mental effort. Psychologist Fritz Heider (1958) wrote that, “behavior tends to engulf the field and that perceivers tend to attribute behavior to whatever grabs their attention” (cited in Kazdin, 2000). Observers pay selective attention to the most accessible and easily processed information and fail to process less obvious, yet vitally important, contextual cues. Internal attributions are made because people are more likely to notice and focus on the actor’s behavior than other external aspects of the situation (Forgas, 1998). Although the attributions a person makes using this method may not be accurate this simple attribution strategy saves the observer considerable time and effort.

The fundamental attribution error may also occur because the perceiver lacks adequate background information pertaining to the situation (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). An observer may know very little about the context of the situation and possible environmental or social constraints. As a result the person will rely more on dispositional factors in order to explain and understand the particular event. The human lexicon provides an additional explanation for the fundamental attribution error. Psychologists have noted that language is richer in terms used to describe behavior than to describe the situation (Reeder, 1982). This may cause the behavior terms to be more salient in the observer’s mind and because humans are cognitive misers they will be more likely to use these easily accessible words to quickly explain the situation.

Jones and Quattrone have considered the anchoring and insufficient adjustment heuristic as an explanation of the fundamental attribution error (Kazdin, 2000). This rationalization states that the actor’s behavior provides an initial anchor and then a correction or adjustment is made when the observer takes into account the external situational factors (Kazdin, 2000). Unfortunately, the adjustment made is usually insufficient. The perceiver assigns insufficient weight to situational causes, even when they are made aware of them, and this results in the fundamental attribution error.

Several studies have been conducted to further explain the fundamental attribution error. A classic study done by Jones and Harris (1967) investigated this phenomenon. Participants were shown speeches, written by college students, that either favored or opposed Fidel Castro, the communist leader of Cuba. The independent variable was whether the college students were allowed to choose, or were assigned by the

experimenters, to write a pro-Castro or an anti-Castro essay. The dependent variable was the participants' pro-Castro attitude, measured on a scale of 10 to 70, as rated by observers.

If the participants were told that the writers were assigned a particular side then their measurements of the students' true attitudes should be the same, regardless of whether they were forced to write in favor of or against Castro. If the position was assigned, how could participants infer the writers' true positions knowing that the behavior was forced by the situation? However, results revealed that participants were willing to make internal attributions even when they were told the essay writer had no choice (Cohen, Maoz, and Trope, 1988 ). This study illustrates the fundamental attribution error at work: people ignored the situational pressures to write a pro-Castro essay, attributed their behavior to dispositional factors and concluded that the writer's true opinion must be pro-Castro as well (Cohen et al., 1988). Despite clear evidence that behavior was shaped by external forces observers still disregarded highly salient situational factors.

The occurrence of the fundamental attribution error yields both positive and negative consequences. Although the FAE may lead to misattribution in particular situations it can also serve as a useful heuristic. This "error" is often employed as a mental shortcut to easily process complex social situations while saving time and cognitive energy (Reeder, 1982). This FAE often gives people a sense of control over their social environments and, as a result, they become more adept at predicting human behavior. However, as its name suggests, the fundamental attribution error has negative consequences as well. For example, believing that a person's behavior is a direct result of their internal dispositions can lead observer's to feel indifferently towards underprivileged groups such as the homeless or AIDS sufferers (Kazdin, 2000). People may attribute the poor conditions of these victims to their internal dispositions without considering situational factors that may have lead to these unfortunate circumstances.

Many psychologists have critiqued the fundamental attribution error for various reasons. Some have argued that under certain conditions, it may be just as inaccurate to exhibit a tendency to make situational attributions as it is under other conditions to make dispositional attributions (Harvey, 1981). The concept of a fundamental attribution error in social situations presupposes that criteria have been established to determine the accuracy of attributions in social context. However, critics believe that the suggested criteria for accuracy need further refinement and investigation (Harvey, 1981). Given the difficulty in determining accuracy situational biases may be just as fundamental as dispositional errors. Another critique of the FAE is based on the distinction between error and bias. Bias is defined as a "tendency to prefer a given cognition over its possible alternatives" (Reeder, 1982). By this definition, observers'

preference for dispositional factors causes a strong bias in attribution. Error, on the other hand, is defined as “an inconsistency between a hypothesis and one or more propositions so strongly believed in as to be considered facts” (Harvey, 1981). Thus, the FAE can only be an “error” if, in a given situation, an inconsistency can be illustrated between the observer’s attribution (hypothesis) and the true cause of the actor’s behavior (fact).

With this information one can conclude that the fundamental attribution error is an error in thinking, on behalf of the observer, which often leads to a misattribution of behavior in a given situation. While the FAE may not be a fundamental error, as many social psychologists have argued, it certainly is a common cognitive bias. An understanding of this flawed mental shortcut can help observers avoid it in the future by taking into account the subtle situational factors when making behavioral attributions. Observers are less likely to make the FAE if they suspect underlying external causes or they feel motivated to exert more cognitive effort in order to accurately process the situation.

### **Example / Application**

#### **Example:** [Idiot Parking a Car](#)

**Application:** After watching the video, what was your reaction? Was the driver an idiot for smashing into the other car for no reason? Was the driver a jerk for not leaving a note or trying to amend for his actions? Most people tend to explain OTHER people's behavior as due to their "personalities". But are there "situational" reasons for the driver's actions? Maybe the driver was rushing to the hospital for a medical emergency? The fundamental attribution error may have occurred in this case if you overestimated the "personality" explanations for the driver's behavior instead of thinking of possible "situational" factor that could account for the behavior. Notice that the caption for this video is "Idiot Parking a Car". That caption IS the fundamental attribution error because we have no way of knowing the true cause of the behavior, so attributing the bad driving to personality causes is a potential error.