

# Fundamental Attribution Error

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By Saul McLeod, published 2018

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The fundamental attribution error (also known as correspondence bias or overattribution effect) is the tendency for people to over-emphasise dispositional, or personality-based explanations for behaviours observed in others while under-emphasising situational explanations.

In other words, people have a cognitive bias to assume that a person's actions depend on what "kind" of person that person is rather than on the social and environmental forces that influence the person.

The term was coined by Lee Ross some years after the now-classic experiment by Jones and Harris. Ross (1977) argued in a popular paper that the fundamental attribution error forms the conceptual bedrock for the field of social psychology.

We tend to see others as internally motivated and responsible for their behavior. This could be because of perceptual salience, that is, the other person is what we see most of when we look at them; or it could be that we lack more detailed information about what causes their behavior.

## What is an example of the fundamental attribution error?

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Perhaps the saddest example of the tendency to make internal attributions whether they are warranted or not is blaming the victim.

If giving someone our sympathy or blaming the true culprit somehow causes us dissonance, we may hold the victim responsible for his or her own pain and suffering. "He had it coming" and "she was asking for it" are all-too-common phrases!

## Empirical Evidence

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Jones and Harris (1967) hypothesized that people would attribute apparently freely-chosen behaviors to disposition (personality), and apparently chance-directed behaviors to situation. The hypothesis was confounded by the fundamental attribution error.

Participants listened to pro- and anti-Fidel Castro speeches. Participants were asked to rate the pro-Castro attitudes of the speakers. When the subjects believed that the speakers freely chose the positions they took (for or against Castro), they naturally rated the people who spoke in favor of Castro as having a more positive attitude toward Castro.

However, contradicting Jones and Harris' initial hypothesis, when the participants were told that the speaker's positions were determined by a coin toss, they still rated speakers who spoke in favor of Castro as having, on average, a more positive attitude towards Castro

than those who spoke against him.

In other words, the participants were unable to see the speakers as mere debaters coldly performing a task chosen for them by circumstance; they could not refrain from attributing some disposition of sincerity to the speakers.

## Critical Evaluation

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Fundamental attribution bias may not be universal across cultures. While American children were found by Miller (1984), as they grow older, to place increasing reliance upon disposition as an explanation of events observed, the Hindu children of India by contrast based their explanations more on situations.

This finding is consistent with the theory that some countries, like the U.S., emphasize an individualistic self-concept. Raised in a society that places a premium on individual achievement and uniqueness, Americans seem to develop a tendency to focus on characteristics of the individual in making attributions.

## References

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