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# Some Examples of Fundamental Attribution Error Which We Make Daily

6-7 minutes

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The term fundamental attribution error may sound heavy, but when we try and understand what it is, it is rather easy to relate to this concept. We make such errors all the time in our daily lives, without realizing it. It is, in effect, a term used to describe the judgments we make about individuals based on a situation. It is something we have all resorted to at some point of time. Here, we try and explain this concept with the help of some fundamental attribution error examples.

## Basics

Fundamental attribution error, also termed as a cognitive bias in social psychology, or the [attribution theory of social psychology](#), is defined as the tendency to judge a person in an unpleasant situation in a bad light, and attribute her/his behavior to internal causes and qualities rather than understanding the situation or circumstances that may cause the person to behave in that manner. On the other hand, were we to make the same errors, we would easily attribute the causes to external factors. It is described as the overestimation of the attributes of another person's personality and the underestimation of our own personal qualities in relation to a particular situation.

## List of Examples

When you walk into a store and someone bumps into you, what is the first thought that crosses your mind? That the person who bumped into you is careless, is not looking where he is going, does not know how to behave in public, etc.? All these and many other thoughts and judgments about him are created in your mind, without being aware of the situation that the person may be in. Here, you are making a fundamental attribution error, because you are attributing certain characteristics to the person based on that one incident, without being aware of what he may actually be like.

**# 1:** Your friend fails an exam that both of you have given. She always seems to get a low grade. You begin to think that she is lazy; she's more involved in activities other than studying; that she is not interested in studies. However, it is possible that she may be having trouble retaining information, or that there may be circumstances at home that do not permit her to study enough for any upcoming test.

**# 2:** Many of us attribute the 'commitment phobia' many people claim to suffer from as going with the flow or a trend. Being phobic of committing to someone is what people think is something that has been learned by watching television. However, there are real reasons why someone may suffer from a commitment phobia. For instance, children who have seen their parents go through a divorce are likely to suffer from such fears of commitment. Again, a grave mistake has been made because of generalization.

**# 3:** Someone is having trouble starting their car. You decide to help the person by giving her a piece of advice on something they should do to get the car started. The person shoots you down,

snaps at you, or just ignores you. You get angry yourself and dismiss the person as a rude, misbehaved individual who does not value the help someone is trying to offer. It is probably likely that a lot of people have offered the person the same piece of advice that you did and it didn't work; or that the person has already had a rough day and the car getting spoiled was the cherry on the icing. This is another example.

### **Why do we Make such Errors?**

Psychologists have explained several reasons for these errors that we tend to make such as those explained in the examples above. For one, because we have no other reference point except the person in question, we are likely to make a judgment about the person in order to pacify ourselves. In our own case, because we know exactly what the situation is, we know what to attribute our success or failure to. It is perhaps easier to 'assume' rather than determine the actual cause of a situation, for the fear that it may make us uncomfortable. While these are the causes, these are in no ways justified methods of making assumptions about a person. The best way to understand this is by the fact that when someone makes judgments about us or says something about us without knowing what we are going through, it angers us to no extent. How then, can we justify making an assumption about someone else without knowing that person?

### **The Other Side**

While the fundamental attribution error is made by judging a person based on his intrinsic behavior and our own on external situations, opposite cases are also likely. For instance, when someone earns a promotion at work, we tend to attribute this success to external

factors by adopting what is known as the 'sour grapes' attitude. We think it's because he is favored by a particular manager, or because he's just plain lucky. Here, we fail to attribute this success to his personal traits such as determination or hard work. In another example, a person with a low self-esteem or poor self-image may assume that he is unable to find a life partner because he doesn't look good or because he isn't funny. On the other hand, this may actually happen because he is not making the effort to go out and meet people, thereby limiting his chances of meeting someone.

It is important to learn how to avoid making the fundamental attribution error. Stopping to think for a moment and understanding the cause for a particular person's behavior is something all of us ought to do in order to avoid making assumptions about someone. This will improve our observation powers and will help us empathize with others. By understanding the aforementioned examples, you will be able to dodge such situations and look at it from a third person's perspective. Further, in your own case, there is nothing wrong with attributing some internal and external factors to your gain or loss in certain situations where it is deserved. Just don't make either a habit.