

## **Social Cognition**

We are unconsciously and automatically forming quick judgments and drawing conclusions about the characteristics of other people such as a person's attractiveness, likeability competence, trustworthiness and aggressiveness ([page 445](#)).

These initial impressions can be wrong and we don't realize it because

- (1) we don't get feedback on our performance
- (2) we can distort reality to make our first impressions match our perception.
- (3) we are unaware of alternative interpretations of what we observe.

Our perceptions of others are guided by our

- implicit personality theories,
- social categories and
- attributions we make of their behavior.

These processes are unconscious and automatic so we are often unaware how our perception and thinking is being influenced.

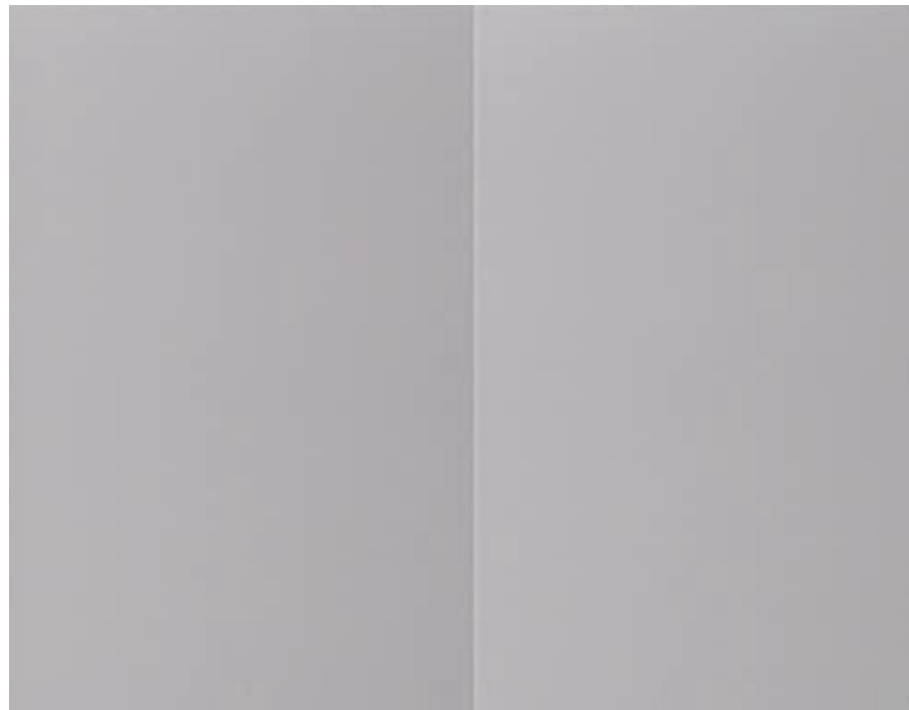
## **Social Cognition and Social Categorization**

Social categorization is the mental process of classifying people into groups on the basis of common characteristics ([page 446](#)).

Social categorization processes can be explicit or implicit. These categories can be as simple as an “us” versus “them” (or in-group and out-group), men and women, Generation X and Generation Y, democrats and republicans, etc. Dividing people into groups can exaggerate differences between groups

## **Social Cognition and Social Categorization**

Social categorization creates groups and boundaries that define the groups. Boundaries can create the perception of differences even when they don't exist. The following is a visual illusion from the Discovering Psychology #7: Sensation and Perception at about 20:00 into the video



Most people see the left and right side and different shades of grey. Now cover up the center line.

Common examples of implicit personality theories (stereotypes) apply to the following:

- Serial killers (The serial killer from Spokane doesn't fit our stereotype of serial killers)
- Rapists, drug dealers, drug users
- The physically attractive
- Racial, religious and ethnic groups
- Scientists, engineers, accountants, computer programmers
- Blonds
- Bald men
- Politicians: Republicans, Democrats
- Terrorists
- Native Americans
- The elderly and the young (see chapter 9)
- Homosexuals and lesbians (see chapter 10)
- The mentally ill (see chapter 14)
- "bikers"
- Gender stereotypes

## Implicit Personality Theories

We make unconscious decisions based on implicit theories about people. Over time, we reinforce these theories through biased thinking strategies such as the:

- confirmation bias (Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence),
- fallacy of positive instances
- belief-bias (Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence),
- fundamental attributional error, and the
- actor-observer bias.

In addition, our personality theories/beliefs

1. will affect how you interpret ambiguous behavior in a way that is consistent with your theory/beliefs

- e.g. if you believe that homosexuals are effeminate, you will interpret behavior by homosexuals as more effeminate than that by heterosexuals.

2. will affect what you remember about the person that is consistent with your theory/beliefs

- e.g. if you believe that lesbians are masculine, you will remember behavior by lesbians as more masculine than they were.

If our theories and beliefs about people are valid, we will make good inferences.  
If our theories and beliefs are not valid, we will make bad inferences.

Poor implicit theories about people can confer advantages to some groups or individuals while discriminating against others (and thus affect their self-efficacy, and likelihood of reaching their full human potential--remember the Baraku people in Japan and stereotype threat (Chapter 7)).

## **Attributional Biases in Social Perception**

We are often inferring the causes of people's behavior (including our own). We want to have an explanation or "story" that makes sense with our understanding of the world. However, when we explain the cause of behavior, there are some biases that can systematically lead to errors in perception.

- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Hindsight bias
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Actor/Observer discrepancy (not in Hockenbury and Nolan)

(other biases and thinking strategies learned in Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence that can affect social perception)

- fallacy of positive instances
- belief bias
- confirmation bias
- availability heuristic
- representative heuristic

## Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

Attributions are explanations we use for why events or actions occur. People seem to have a desire to understand and explain why things happen. However, not all attributions are accurate and unbiased.

The fundamental attributional error is the tendency to for individualistic cultures to explain other people's behavior with the tendency to overemphasize internal, personal traits, while ignoring or underestimating the effects of external, situational factors.

Internal and Personal characteristics
<b>Alex Trebeck is smart</b>

External and Situational Factors
<b>Alex Trebeck has the answers provided to him</b>

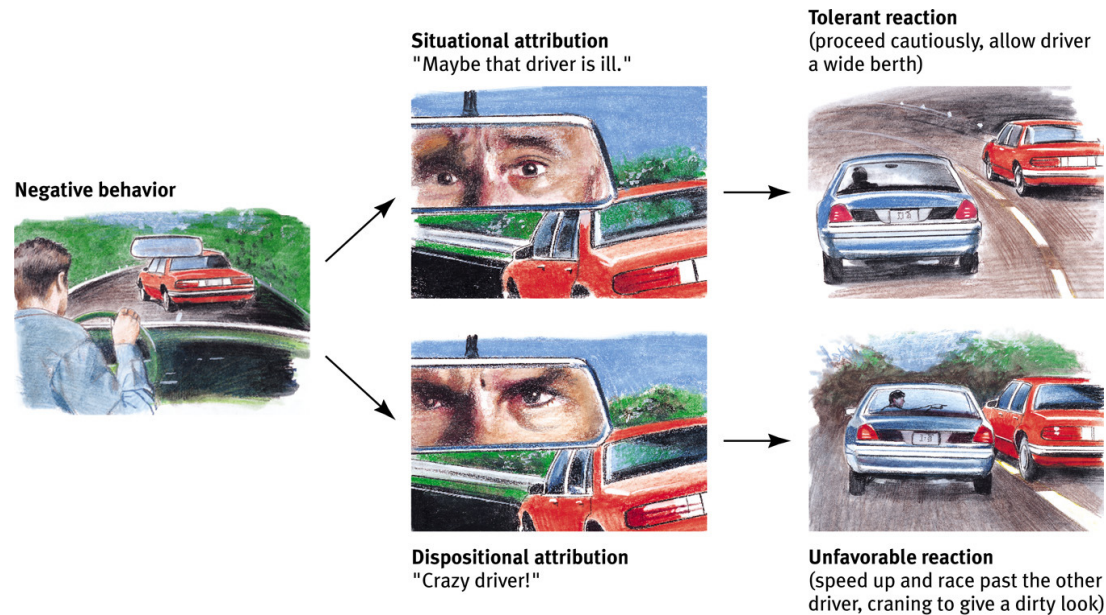




## Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)

Internal and Personal characteristics
<b>Crazy driver</b>

External and Situational Factors
Maybe the driver is ill or had to avoid something in the road.



In this case, members of individualistic cultures like the United States tend to focus on the person and make an attribution about the person (Crazy driver!). While those from a more collectivist culture like Japan tend to focus on the situation and make more situational attributions (Maybe that driver is ill).

## Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

A television show, such as Breaking Bad, is successful because

Internal and Personal characteristics
<b>Bryan Cranston is an excellent actor</b>

External and Situational Factors



This attributional error is common when bad things happen and observers tend to blame the victim of crime, disaster such as floods, or illness.

For example:

- When people take note of ethnic neighborhoods, dominated by crime and poverty,
  - the personal qualities of the residents are blamed for these problems,
  - while other situational explanations, such as job discrimination, poor police service, etc. are downplayed.
- When one fails to get a job,
  - people can underestimate (social) situational factors such as opportunity, unemployment rates and connections and
  - overemphasize dispositional factors and label people as incompetent or lazy.
- Americans used IQ tests to demonstrate that Caucasians were more intelligent than many immigrants at the turn of the century,
- When explaining why Americans interned the Japanese during WWII, we fail to consider situational factors
- The exposure of an unborn fetus to radiation without the mothers' knowledge. While we agree that these are unacceptable, there is a tendency to discount situational factors and public sentiment at the time.

- When talking about terrorist, we tend to make personality attributions (they are “evil”) and discount American foreign policy.

Using the fundamental attributional error, explain why a policy of “killing” terrorists is unlikely to reduce the threat of terrorism for Americans.

## Why is recognizing the Fundamental Attributional Error important?

There are many factors influencing behavior. Not recognizing the fundamental attributional error (overestimating personality factors and underestimating situational factors) makes it difficult to address problems such as the following because we focus too much on the person.

- Student's cheating on exams: We tend to make personality attributions and focus on the person, and not take into account social pressures to do well.
- School Shootings: There is a tendency to focus on the personality of the individual and not look at the social environment, such as bullying, which took Americans a long time.
- Enron/Worldcom's accounting practices: There is a tendency to focus on "bad individuals". However, there are institutional processes that reinforce an individual to manipulate the books.
- Telemarketers: People tend to focus on the individuals as being bad people, calling them and being annoying, and not as a person who needed to work and that was what was available.

- Driving: People tend to blame people for being bad drivers when they aren't allowed to merge in and ignore situational factors (such as another car not allowing that driver to merge).
- Drug abuse: The root causes of drug use are partially situational. Telling someone "just say no!" is (and was) an ineffective strategy to fight drugs abuse.
- Suicide: We tend to focus on the personality of the person, and underestimate situation factors such as (accessibility to the means of committing suicide, the situational factors affecting the mood and cognitions).
- Problems in Iraq:

## Hindsight Bias

The hindsight bias is the tendency, after an event has occurred to overestimate one's ability to have foreseen or predicted the outcome ([page 449](#)).



Only after we know what happens, it is easy to construct a plausible story to see how the conclusion was “inevitable”. The hindsight bias can make it easier to blame a victim if, you the observer, were overconfident in seeing the how the outcome occurred after knowing the outcome.

## **Just World Belief and Blaming the Victim**

The strong need for people to believe that the world is just and fair. Because the world is “just and fair”, victims must have done something to deserve his or her fate. Therefore people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The consequence of this belief is that people tend to:

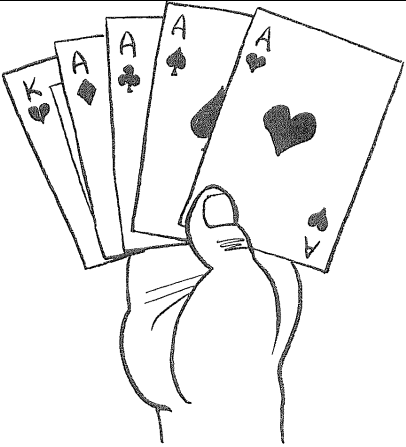
- blame the victim of rape,
- blame battered spouses by saying they provoked their beatings and they “let it happen to themselves”,
- blame the victims of dog attacks,
- blame the poor are solely responsible for their condition,
- blame sick people are responsible for their illness.


A disproportional amount of weight is given to dispositional (personality) factors, and the contribution of situational factors is underestimated—the fundamental attributional error. The wealthy and healthy see their good fortune, and the misfortune of others as justly deserved. Linking good fortune with virtue and misfortune with moral failure enable the fortunate to feel pride in their achievements and absolve them of responsibility toward the misfortunate.



## Self-serving bias and Self-effacing bias

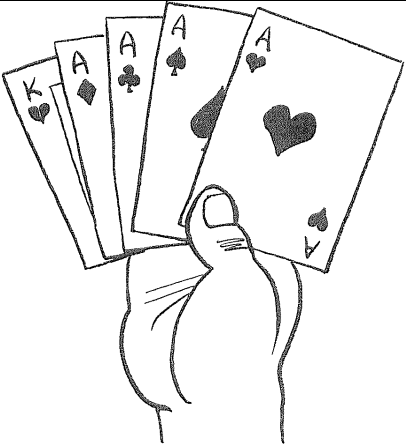
Self-serving bias: The tendency for *individualistic* cultures to explain success with internal, personal causes, and failures with external, situational causes.


<b>Successes</b>
Internal, personal causes

<b>“When I win, it is skill”</b>

<b>Failures</b>
External, situational causes

<b>“When I lose, it is bad luck”</b>

## Self-serving bias and Self-effacing bias

Self-effacing bias: The tendency to *collectivist* cultures to explain success with external, situational causes, and failures with internal, personal causes.

<b>Successes</b>
External, situational causes

<b>“When I win, it is good luck”</b>

<b>Failures</b>
Internal, personal causes

<b>“When I lose, I wasn't trying”</b>

Effect of the self-serving bias:

- Those who tend to commit the self-serving bias tend to be happier, but have a less accurate perception of the world around them. (they are distorting reality)

## **Student examples of self-serving bias**

Mick likes to cook and is pretty good and knows it. He says he has a talent for it etc. However, when the dish comes out bad, he says it's because the meat was not fresh or the wine was not good.

Richard is a hockey goal-tender and when his team wins, he talks about the great saves he made, etc. When his team loses the team played like crap. "Where was my defense?", Richard says "I was screened, that shot was deflected, he didn't cover his man, etc."

When Jeff got an "A" on his History mid-term he congratulated himself on being so smart. Then when he got a "D" on the History final exam he sighed and reassured herself that he had been tired and overly stressed and that is why he got the "D".

The last time Ashley aced a test, she claimed it was because she was smart. Yet, in the same class, the test before, she failed and blamed her failure on unfair teaching practices.

## Actor-observer discrepancy

As an exception to the fundamental attribution error, there tends to be a bias in the opposite direction.

- When we are the actor (explaining our own behavior), we tend to attribute our own behavior to external causes.
- When we are the observer of someone else's behavior, we tend to attribute their behavior to internal causes.

For example



The explanation when you are the ACTOR
Situational explanations



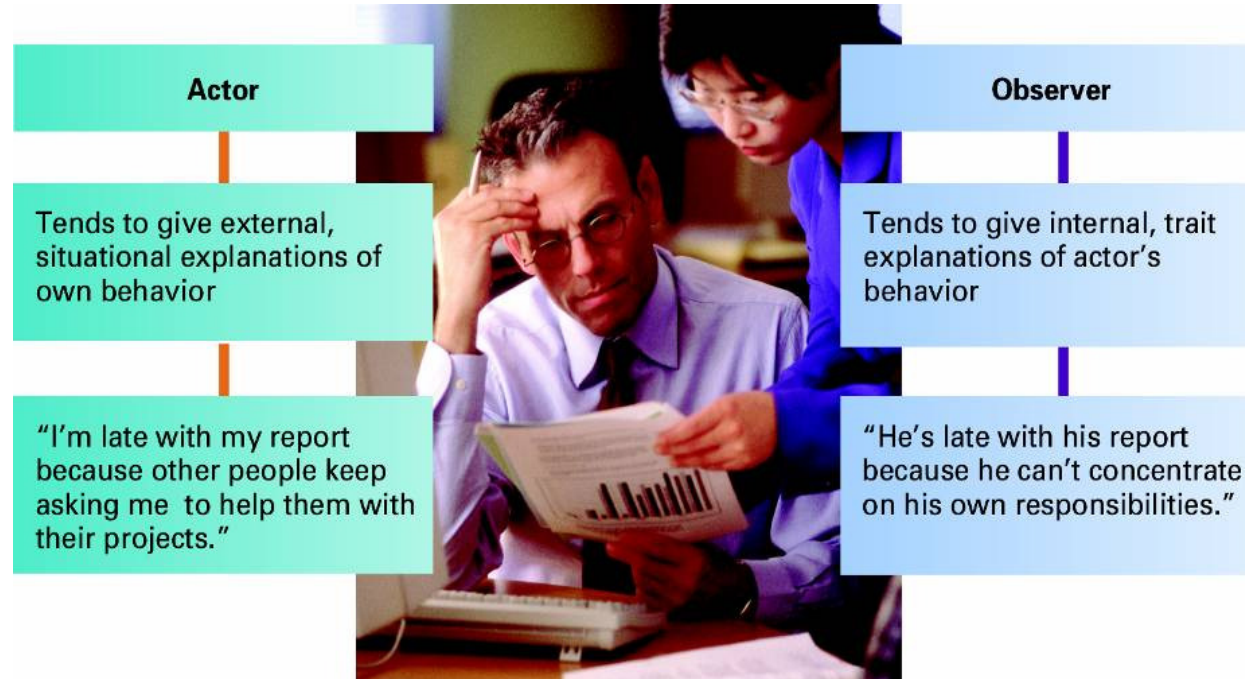
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The explanation when you are the OBSERVER
Personality explanations

## Actor-observer discrepancy

For example, a report comes in late.



There is a discrepancy or bias when explaining the same behavior. Quite often these discrepancies occur over a period of time and are more difficult to detect. In addition, if we believe we are "fair" and "unbiased", we might be motivated NOT to detect these discrepancies.

Other Examples:

- When I don't know how to do my job, it is due to lack of training (the situation).
- When you don't know how to do the job, it is incompetence (dispositional).

## Actor-observer discrepancy



The explanation when you are the ACTOR	↓	≠	↓	The explanation when you are the OBSERVER
Situational explanations				Personality explanations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When I come to the meeting unprepared and late, it is because something came up or traffic was bad.</li></ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When you come unprepared and late, it is due to lack of interest in the job.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When I hit you, it is because I was provoked.</li></ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When you hit me, it is because you are aggressive.</li></ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I was pressed for time.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• She's a reckless, out-of-state driver.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When I'm unemployed, it is because of a bad job market.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When "you" are unemployed, it is because "you" are lazy.</li></ul>

## Actor /Observer bias

1. READ DIRECTIONS ON BOX



2. THROW BOX AWAY



3. PULL BOX OUT OF TRASH  
15 SECONDS LATER



4. REPEAT



When I do this, I wasn't paying attention, when you do it...

## **Student examples of the actor-observer discrepancy**

I was driving in my car and there was a REALLY slow driver head of me who would almost turn at the intersection and then change his mind and keep going straight and who was making me crazy. What a bad driver!!!

A couple days later, I was driving in Portland and I was trying to find my friend's new house. I had the map but I couldn't find the right streets and I was driving slowly and I almost turned down the wrong street a few times and someone honked at me! It really made me angry because I'm not a bad driver, I'm just a little lost!!!

## **Attributional biases and social perception**

- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Hindsight bias
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Actor/Observer discrepancy (not in Hockenbury and Nolan)

These biases in attribution can be difficult to spot because they rarely occur in tandem (very rarely will we say we aced a test because of hard work, and then say we failed a test because it was unfair. These statements often follow each other after some time making them more difficult to see). We need to have an ear for what people say

Who should learn about these attributional biases? Why should they learn about them?

What are the consequences of not recognizing how we make attributions-- especially when we are inconsistent (or why should we study how we perceive others)?