

Chapter 4: Understanding Others

From Physical Appearance to Inferences about Personality Traits

- The Accuracy of Snap Judgments

From Acts to Dispositions: The Importance of Causal Attribution

- The Pervasiveness and Importance of Causal Attribution
- Explanatory Style and Attribution

The Processes of Causal Attribution

- Attribution and Covariation
- Attribution and Imagining
- Alternative Actors and Outcomes

Errors and Biases in Attribution

- The Self-Serving Bias
- The Fundamental Attribution Error
- Causes of the Fundamental Attribution Error
- The Actor-Observer Difference in Causal Attributions

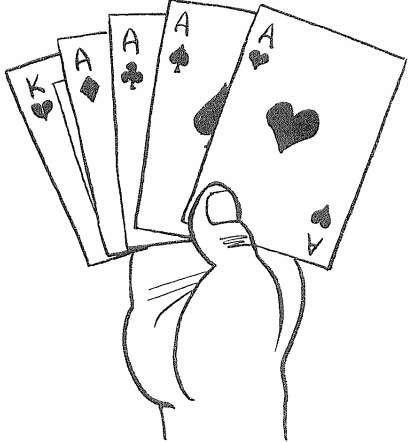
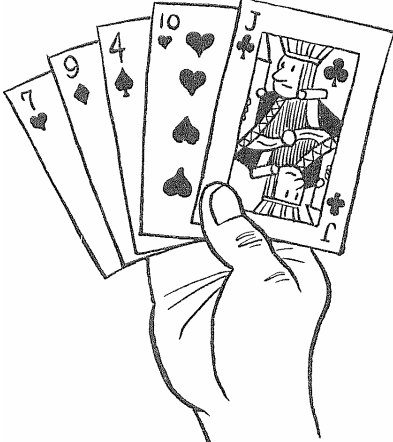
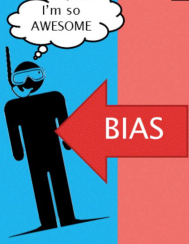

Culture and the Fundamental Attribution Error

- Cultural Differences in Attending to Context
- Causal Attribution for Independent and Interdependent Peoples
- Priming Culture
- Dispositions: Fixed or Flexible?

Beyond the Internal/External Dimension

Errors and Biases in Attribution: the Self-serving bias

Self-serving bias: The tendency to attribute failure and other bad events to external circumstances, but to attribute success and other good events to oneself (page 128).

Successes	Failures
	
<p style="text-align: center;">WHEN YOU WIN A POT</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: center;"> <p>SKILL</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: center;"> <p>LUCK</p> </div> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">WHEN YOU LOSE A POT</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: center;"> <p>SKILL</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: center;"> <p>LUCK</p> </div> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>
Internal, personal causes	External, situational causes
"When I win, it is skill"	"When I lose, it is bad luck"

There is a discrepancy or bias when explaining wins and losses. Quite often these discrepancies occur over a period of time and are more difficult to detect.

Errors and Biases in Attribution: the Self-serving bias

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.

Errors and Biases in Attribution: the Self-serving bias

Those in happy marriages attribute their partner's behavior in the same way they attribute their own behavior, whereas unhappy couples do not. This attributional style has probably developed over time and becomes automatic.

- Those attribute positive behaviors of themselves and their partner to internal characteristics, while explaining negative behaviors to external factors.
- Those in unhappy marriages explain their partner's positive behavior externally while they explain their negative behavior internally.

	Happy Couples		Unhappy Couples	
	Explaining their Behavior	Explaining My Behavior	Explaining their Behavior	Explaining My Behavior
Positive Behaviors	He/she is such a sweet person	I am such a sweet person	He/she is trying to get something from me	I am such a sweet person
Negative Behaviors	They had a rough day	I had a rough day	He/she is a dirty rotten scoundrel	I had a rough day

Errors and Biases in Attribution: the Self-serving bias



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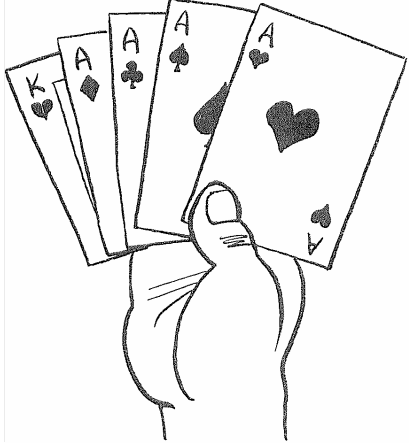
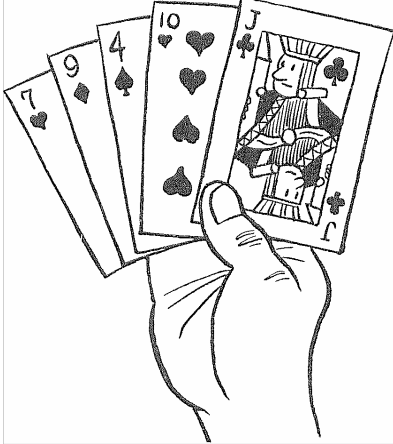
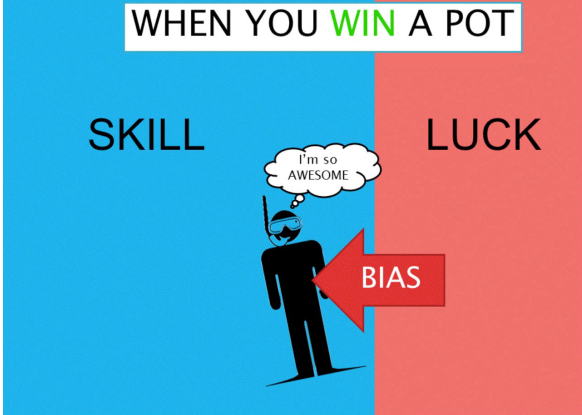
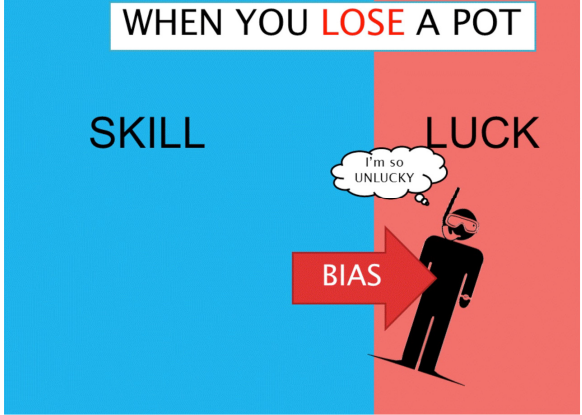
When the Boston Red Sox lose, it is attributed to external factors (the curse of Babe Ruth). When the Boston Red Sox win, it is due to hard work

In addition, CEOs claimed credit for 83% of all positive events, while accepting blame 19% of all negative events (page 129).

Errors and Biases in Attribution: The Self-effacing bias

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

This is the opposite of what we find in individualistic cultures with the self-serving bias.

Successes	Failures
	
<p>WHEN YOU WIN A POT</p> <p>SKILL LUCK</p> 	<p>WHEN YOU LOSE A POT</p> <p>SKILL LUCK</p> 
Internal, personal causes	External, situational causes
"When I win, it is skill"	"When I lose, it is bad luck"

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.

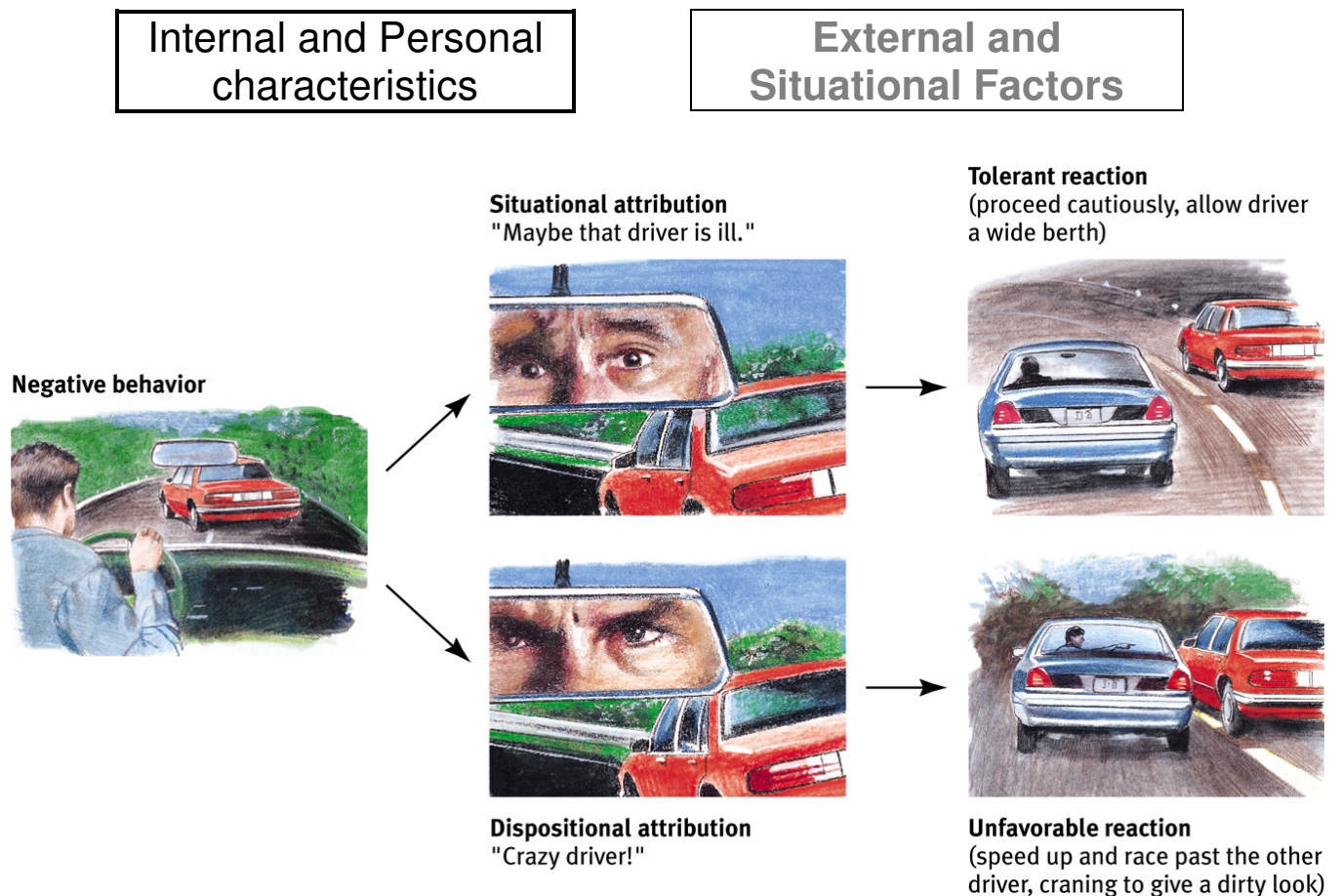
I usually score about 92-96% on my calculus tests. When I received 100% on a calculus test I thought that it was because I was good at calculus. The next test I got an 88% and claimed that the professor graded unfairly.

A friend of mine is taking an Anatomy class this summer. At the first of the term she really liked the teacher and the subject. She was excited to learn and understand more about her body. She felt confident because the teacher was so good. Now, after failing two tests she has changed her mind. She is no longer interested or excited in the subject and she now says that the teacher goes too fast and doesn't care for the students and their learning processes. She knows she isn't doing well and she has reasoned this by the teachers lack of concern and the bad subject instead of acknowledging that she could try harder, review with the classmates, attend review sessions and so on. The impact is that she is worried and scared, and she has lost hope. She blames her loss of interest on the teacher and not on her grade results. She may or may not improve. It has yet to be seen with one week left.

Tonya Harding was skating in the Olympic finals and her skate lace broke. She had to stop during her performance to get another one. After the performance was all over, I heard her say that she would have done better if she did not have the problem with her lace. I seriously doubt that she would not attribute her success to her skates.

Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

The fundamental attributional error is the tendency to for individualistic cultures to attribute the behavior of other people to internal, personal characteristics, while ignoring or underestimating the effects of external, situational factors.



In this case, members of individualistic cultures like the United States tend to focus on the person and make a dispositional attribution (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).

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 employers are looking for new employees, some discourage the hiring of the unemployed because they must be not as skilled or else they would not have lost their job (see NPR story).
- 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
- 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.
- 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 forming beliefs about politicians, we tend to overestimate the dispositional factors influencing their judgment and underestimate the situational factors. When attributing qualities to the president, we give the president too much credit for their role in steering the economy—especially when the economy goes bad (this is moderated by your political affiliation). In addition to this, we don’t give the president credit when the economy goes well.
- The development of the atomic bomb during WWII,

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.
- Explaining a Couple's behavior at a Baseball Game
- Explaining Mr. Fed Ex

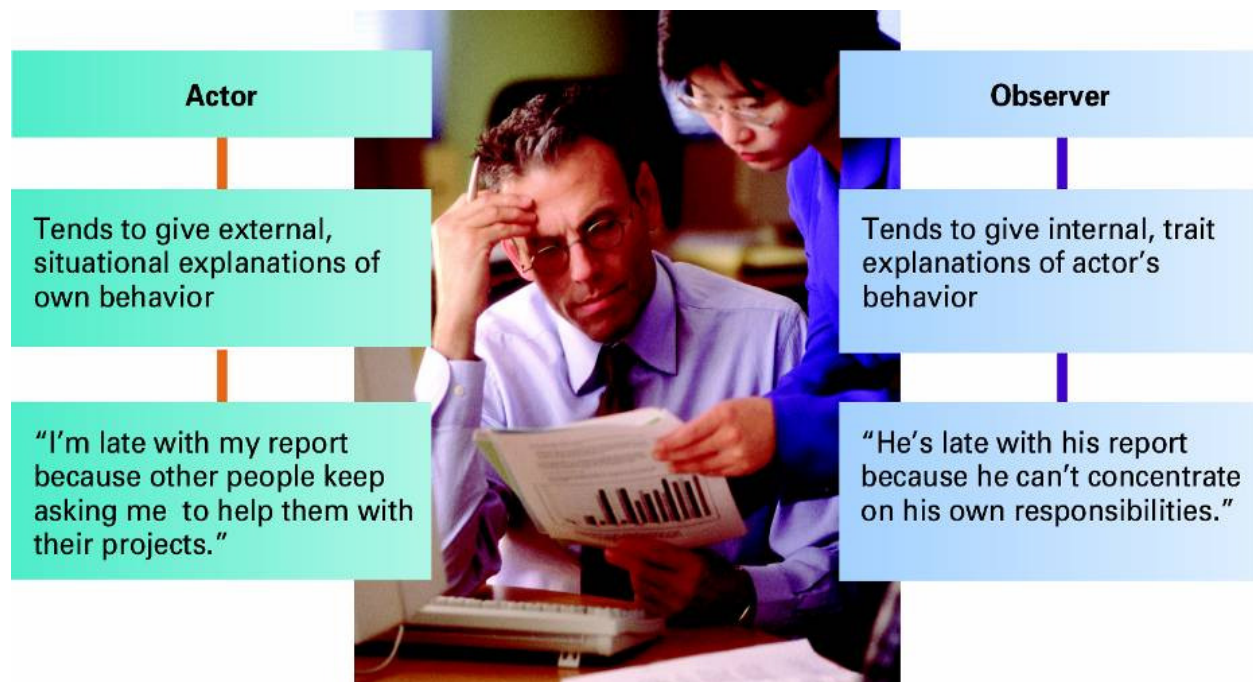
- Driving: People tend to blame people for being bad drivers when they aren't allowed to merge in and ignore situational factors (such as another car not allowing that driver to merge).
- Drug abuse: The root causes of drug use are partially situational. Telling someone "just say no!" is (and was) an 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:

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, 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.

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).
- When I come to the meeting unprepared and late, it is because something came up or traffic was bad.
- When you come unprepared and late, it is due to lack of interest in the job.
- When I hit you, it is because I was provoked.
- When you hit me, it is because you are aggressive.
- She's a reckless, out-of-state driver.
- I was pressed for time.
- I forgot because of a brain fart.
- You forgot because you are incompetent.
- When I'm unemployed, it is because of a bad job market.
- When "you" are unemployed, it is because "you" are lazy.

- When I leave the cell phone on in class, it was an accident. I got distracted when I normally turn it off. When other students forget to turn their cell phone off in class, it is because they are irresponsible and inconsiderate.
- When I see “kids” misbehave it is because they are “bad”. When I misbehaved as a kid, it was just something you did.
- When I use the physical attractiveness stereotype, it is because he/she was just SO attractive. When you use the physical attractiveness stereotype, it is because you are shallow.

Why does this bias occur?

What have we studied before where we are inconsistent in explaining behavior or biased in interpreting and explaining “our reality”?

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!!!

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 attribution 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.

Relate the just world belief to cognitive dissonance theory (belief: I am a good person, behavior: _____).

Attributional biases and social perception

- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
- Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Actor/Observer discrepancy

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

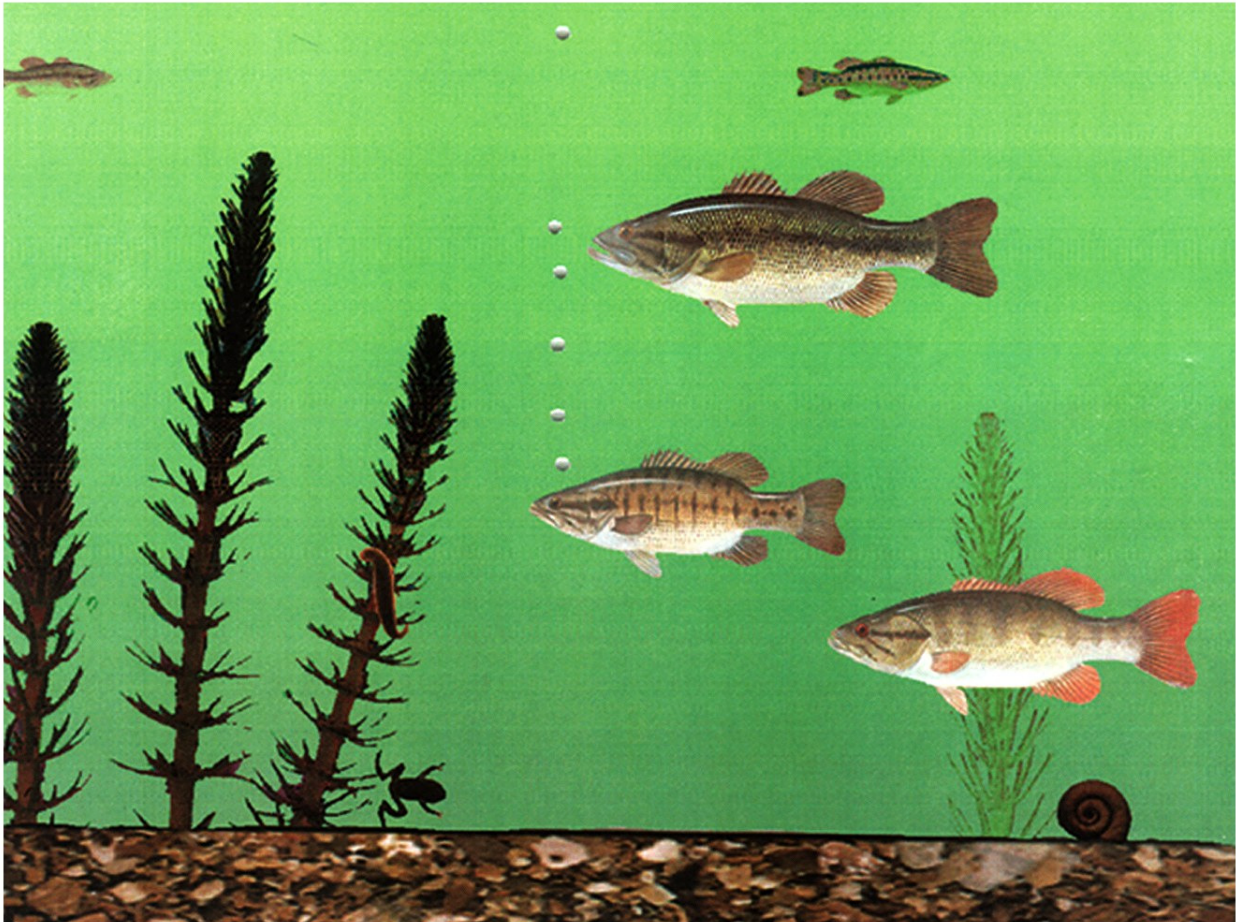
Who should learn about these attributional biases? Why should they learn about them?

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)?

Cognitive Load and Attribution

When we are cognitively overload, have a lot on our plate, or multitasking, we are more likely to make these errors and fail to consider alternative explanations (such as situational factors), page 139.

Culture and the Fundamental Attribution Error



Social Psychology, 2/e Figure 4.12
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Depending on whether you are from a collectivist or an individualistic culture, what you focus your attention on may be different.

Those from an individualistic culture tend to focus on the central features of a scene (the fish). Those from a collectivist culture tend to focus on the context (the rocks and plants).