

Fundamental Attribution Error

Questions for classroom discussions

- 1) If you met a famous white-collar criminal, what would you expect him (or, occasionally, her) to be like?

- 2) Why do you think it is so common to hear white collar criminals described by their neighbors as “the nicest guy,” “a real family man,” “a pillar at the local church,” etc.?

- 3) Can you think of things that you have done in the past that you wish you hadn’t and that you do not believe represent your true character?

- 4) How can we endeavor to judge people’s character more accurately?

Additional Resources

FRANCESCA GINO, *SIDETRACKED: HOW OUR DECISIONS GET DERAILED AND HOW WE CAN STICK TO THE PLAN* 157-58 (2013)

Robert J. Shiller, *Finance and the Good Society* 103 (2012)

Additional Note

The objective of this video is to introduce students to the fundamental attribution error and its implications. One implication is that we often have a tendency to judge others unfairly because we do not take into account the situational factors that may have caused them to make unethical decisions. We jump to the conclusion that they are bad people because they did a bad thing. That said, it is important to remember that situational factors are usually *explanations* for while people err, they are not *excuses*. The best way to avoid this error, experts say, is to put ourselves in the shoes of others and try to envision the pressures they might have faced.

The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute “causes of behavior to actors (i.e., internal, dispositional factors) rather than the situation (i.e., external, environmental factors.” We see that other people have done bad things, and we assume that it is because of their character rather than the fact that they were, perhaps, striving so hard to please their superiors that they did not even notice the ethical issue that they flubbed.

According to some psychologists, the other side of the coin from the fundamental attribution error is the *actor-observer bias*, which is people’s tendency to *over-emphasize* the role of the situation in their own behaviors. They insist there’s nothing wrong with their character, because their errors are accounted for by some situational factor—the boss’s pressure, the need to feed their families, etc.

Francesca Gino writes: “In particular, one mistake we systematically make is known as the *correspondence bias*. When making attributions as we evaluate others, we tend to ascribe too little influence to the situation and too much to their dispositions. In simpler terms, we tend to believe that people’s behavior reflects their unique dispositions and skills, when many times it actually reflects aspects of the situation in which they find themselves.” This sounds a lot like a different name for the fundamental attribution error.

The other implication of the fundamental attribution error is that we may be too easy on ourselves, if we are not careful. We may too readily find situational factors, organizational pressures and the like and then simply excuse our own conduct.

A detailed article on teaching behavioral ethics with extensive teaching resources will be published in Journal of Legal Studies Education (Forthcoming August 2014, Volume 3, Issue 2). To download a PDF of this article by Robert A. Prentice, "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Teaching-Behavioral-Ethics-by-Robert-A.-Prentice.pdf)," go to <http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Teaching-Behavioral-Ethics-by-Robert-A.-Prentice.pdf>

Transcript of Narration

Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Think about the last time you were driving and someone passed you going well over the speed limit. What did you think to yourself? Commonly, people say: “What an idiot!” But, if you are like most drivers, you’ve sped yourself. Of course, you had a good reason to speed. You were late for a test, perhaps. But maybe that “idiot” had a good reason, too.

The *fundamental attribution error* is the tendency we have to attribute causes of other people’s behavior to their character rather than to situational factors. In other words, we tend to take circumstances into account (indeed to exaggerate them) in judging our own behavior, but tend not to do so when judging other people’s behavior.

The relevance this has for business ethics is significant. We concluded that the other guy cheated on his wife because he’s a bad person. I cheated on my wife because I had too much to drink. The other guy fudged the numbers at work because he is a criminal. I fudged the numbers because my boss made me. The other guy padded his expense account because he’s a crook. I padded my expense account because I’m working really hard and my boss underpays me.

The bottom line is that when we read in the newspaper that someone has been involved in a scandal, we tend to say to ourselves: “That person did a bad thing. She must be a bad person. I’m a good person. I wouldn’t do a bad thing.” And we dismiss the possibility of ever being caught in such an ethical blunder or dilemma ourselves.

But if we think about it, we realize that good people do bad things all the time. Good people are subject to many psychological tendencies and organizational pressures that influence human decision making — things such as the desire to please authority and to be part of a team, the vulnerability to role morality and incrementalism, the often overwhelming self-serving bias, and the like.

And we all tend to be overconfident in our own ethicality. Indeed, eighty percent or so of us just know that we’re more ethical than our peers. If this overconfidence makes us too cocky, we may be blindsided by the fundamental attribution error and become one of the many good people who do bad things every day.

When we hear about other people who have made ethical mistakes, perhaps the best thing we can do is put ourselves in their shoes and try to understand why they made the mistakes they made. We must avoid automatically assuming that we are

better people than those who made an ethical misstep. A healthy dose of “there but for the grace of God go I” might be in order. If we can be humble about our own morality and learn from the mistakes of others, perhaps we can guard against making those same mistakes ourselves.