

Social Psychology

A Unit Lesson Plan for High School Psychology Teachers

Activity 1.1

The Fundamental Attribution Error

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The fundamental attribution error (FAE) is the tendency to make dispositional attributions about others and to underestimate the influence of the situation in shaping people's behavior. In this activity, students have the opportunity to rate traits of both themselves and their teachers to demonstrate the FAE.

Materials

Instructors should prepare a two-sided handout with one of two attribution scales on each side. Attribution Scale—Side 1 instructs students to circle those traits that best describe themselves. Attribution Scale—Side 2 instructs students to circle those traits that best describe the psychology instructor. Each scale provides 14 pairs of traits (e.g., uninhibited vs. self-controlled) along with an option to select “depends on the situation.”

Instructions

1. The day before students read about the fundamental attribution error, ask them to fill out the attribution scales in class. Assure them that their answers will be anonymous.
2. After they complete both sides, ask them to count the number of times they circled “depends on the situation” on each side of the sheet and to record that number at the bottom of the page.
3. Assign a student to compute the average number of times “depends on the situation” was circled on each side.
4. Begin class the next day by asking students to guess which side had a higher average and to theorize about why. Then, have the student who computed the averages report her/his findings and discuss them.

If all goes well, students will circle “depends . . .” more frequently in describing themselves, thus evidencing that they were more likely to attribute their teacher's behaviors to personality than they were their own. The most common explanation for this finding is that we see ourselves in many different situations but other people in relatively few. Therefore, we are more sensitive to the impact of the situation on our own behavior.

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Adapted From

Nisbett, R., Caputo, C., Legant, P., & Marecek, J. (1973). Behavior as seen by the actor and as seen by the observer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27, 154-164.

Attribution Scale—Side 1

For each of the following pairs, circle the trait that best describes you. If neither of the traits is most characteristic of you, circle “depends on the situation.”

Uninhibited	Self-Controlled	Depends on the Situation
Cautious	Bold	Depends on the Situation
Dominant	Deferential	Depends on the Situation
Quiet	Talkative	Depends on the Situation
Skeptical	Trusting	Depends on the Situation
Intense	Calm	Depends on the Situation
Realistic	Idealistic	Depends on the Situation
Dignified	Casual	Depends on the Situation
Reserved	Emotional	Depends on the Situation
Lenient	Firm	Depends on the Situation
Unassuming	Self-Asserting	Depends on the Situation
Energetic	Relaxed	Depends on the Situation
Subjective	Analytic	Depends on the Situation
Serious	Lighthearted	Depends on the Situation

Attribution Scale—Side 2

For each of the following pairs, circle the trait that best describes your psychology instructor. If neither of the traits is most characteristic of him/her, circle “depends on the situation.”

Uninhibited	Self-Controlled	Depends on the Situation
Cautious	Bold	Depends on the Situation
Dominant	Deferential	Depends on the Situation
Quiet	Talkative	Depends on the Situation
Skeptical	Trusting	Depends on the Situation
Intense	Calm	Depends on the Situation
Realistic	Idealistic	Depends on the Situation
Dignified	Casual	Depends on the Situation
Reserved	Emotional	Depends on the Situation
Lenient	Firm	Depends on the Situation
Unassuming	Self-Asserting	Depends on the Situation
Energetic	Relaxed	Depends on the Situation
Subjective	Analytic	Depends on the Situation
Serious	Lighthearted	Depends on the Situation