

Fundamental Attribution Error

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as fundamental attribution error. Fundamental attribution error describes how, when judging others’ actions, we unfairly tend to give too much causal weight to their character and not enough to the circumstances in which they acted. In other words, we do not take into account the situational factors that may have caused someone 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 why 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.

Another 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.

The fundamental attribution error is, as Professor Paul Zak writes, 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.

Professor 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.

To learn more about how our own biases can affect our perceptions of others, watch *Self-serving Bias*.

The case study on this page, “Limbaugh on Drug Addiction,” illustrates the role of fundamental attribution error in radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh’s perception of drug abuse before becoming addicted to painkillers, himself. For a



case study about the roles of fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias in the controversy over a popular memoir, read “*A Million Little Pieces*.”

Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in [Concepts Unwrapped](#), as well as in the video case study [In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story](#). Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias.

Discussion Questions

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

Gino, Francesca. 2013. *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Shiller, Robert J. 2012. *Finance and the Good Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using “Ethics Unwrapped” Videos and Educational Materials\).”](#)

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics.](#)"

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?](#)"

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases." *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by

Robert Prentice, J.D.

Business, Government & Society Department

McCombs School of Business

The University of Texas at Austin

"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.”