

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Errors in Explaining Behavior – Why Psychologists Are So "*Liberal*" \*

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First, not all psychologists are liberal. However, as a group, psychologists are more liberal than average. Those who are more conservative tend to label psychologists as "*bleeding-heart liberals*." Why are psychologists more liberal?

One reason is that psychologists understand the **fundamental attribution error**. This is a basic error that everyone tends to make when trying to explain the behavior of themselves and others. We typically blame disliked behavior of others on **dispositional (internal) factors**. In contrast, we usually attribute our bad behavior to **situational (external) causes**.

Suppose a driver changes lanes and cuts off another car. If someone else is the driver, we tend to blame this act on the driver – a dispositional cause. The driver is a nasty or careless person – or just a lousy driver. (With this judgment, we usually choose some "*not-too-nice*" term to describe that person.) However, if *we* were driving the car that changed lanes, we are unlikely to blame ourselves. We are more likely to blame the heavy traffic, the lack of time or some other situational cause.

The fundamental attribution error is related to the **actor-observer effect**. As actors, we are very aware of situational factors that influence our actions. In contrast, if we merely observe someone else's behavior, we are unlikely to be aware of situational factors influencing it. Therefore, we are more likely to blame people who we observe for what happened, but we rarely blame ourselves.

A **self-serving bias** also contributes to errors in judging behavior. We often assume, "*I can do no wrong, but you can do no right*." For example, you write a report for your boss or teacher, and you receive positive comments on the report after it has been read. From the viewpoint of an "*actor*," we would expect you to explain that it was a simple job, or the reader was easily pleased – situational factors. However, with the *self-serving bias*, you are more likely to assign your success to your high level of writing ability and/or effort – dispositional factors.

What if the report is severely criticized? In this case, you are more likely to say that the job was very difficult, you weren't given enough time or the reader was "*picky*" – situational factors. In other words, we tend to take credit for positive outcomes, but we blame negative ones on external factors. In this way, we can feel more worthwhile and look better to others.

These biases in explaining behavior can make the typical middle-class citizen more conservative. With a self-serving bias, you attribute your successes mainly to dispositional factors – you worked hard; you are an honest and moral person. Unless you dig deeper, you are unlikely to attribute your successes to the financial, social and emotional support of others. (However, to be modest, people would give credit to others – at least publicly.)

From this upright, middle-class view, what would you blame for the behavior of criminals or people on welfare? Since you are an observer and with a self-serving bias, dispositional factors would prevail in explaining their behavior. *They* are inherently dishonest or lazy. As observers, we are less aware of the repeated frustrations that have occurred in their lives. It is unlikely that we will blame their meager financial resources, the rejection of others or the lack of training or education. Thus the typical middle-class person is more likely to be conservative.

In contrast, psychologists are more aware of the biases of attribution, so they are more likely to be aware of situational factors. This view makes us seem more **liberal**. As a nation, we are greatly concerned with reducing crime. If we see criminal acts as *dispositional* – as do most conservatives – we will emphasize stiffer penalties and more prisons. If we emphasize *situational* factors – as more liberals do – we will promote improving conditions for disadvantaged children to prevent them from becoming criminals.

However, another element supports the conservative bias. Locking up a criminal has an immediate – but only short term – effect that is easily noticed. In contrast, improving living conditions for children cannot show obvious effects on the crime rate until one or two decades later.

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## With social problems, there are no simple answers.

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Rather than focusing solely on *either* dispositional *or* situational factors, it should be obvious that all behavior stems from an *interaction* of the individuals and their environment. It is difficult to tell what proportion of crime is caused by either set of factors. This is why well-meaning people can come to very divergent conclusions about reducing crime – or any other social problems.

We also have a **gender bias** in our attributions. In our culture, *task-oriented* expertise is viewed as a masculine trait. Women are seen as being less capable. This contributes to gender differences in attributing success in various tasks. If men are successful in work or school, their success is attributed to their *skill* – a dispositional factor. In contrast, when women do well, it is linked to *luck* – a situational factor. Both men and women make similar judgment errors due to gender bias. However, in reality, skill and luck interact to lead both sexes to success.

This article strives to make you aware of biases in inferring causes of behavior – not to make you more liberal. We can only change our biases, after we become aware of them. If we are more aware of our biases, we are more capable of revising our views. Unfortunately – rather than changing our views – we are more likely to take this article to someone else to show them how biased *they* have been.

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\* Adapted from Donald H. McBurney's *How to Think Like a Psychologist: Critical Thinking in Psychology*, Prentice Hall Publishers, 1996, pages 98-100.