

expected goal simply because they're not very unhappy at this failure. And similarly, from this perspective, several of the appraisals sometimes said to be necessary for anger generate hostility primarily because these interpretations are often exceedingly aversive. Someone's deliberate attempt to keep a person from fulfilling his or her desires is much more unpleasant than an accidental interference with his or her goal attainment, and thus, is much more apt to stimulate the person to aggression. This analysis regards the frustration-aggression hypothesis only as a special case of a much more general proposition: Decidedly aversive occurrences are the fundamental generators of anger and the instigation to aggression.

*Leonard Berkowitz*

*See also* Aggression; Anger

### Further Readings

- Anderson, C. A., Deuser, W. E., & DeNeve, K. M. (1995). Hot temperatures, hostile affect, hostile cognition, and arousal: Tests of a general model of affective aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *21*, 434-448.
- Berkowitz, L. (1989). Frustration-aggression hypothesis: Examination and reformulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *106*, 59-73.
- Berkowitz, L., & Harmon-Jones, E. (2004). Toward an understanding of the determinants of anger. *Emotion*, *4*, 107-130.
- Dill, J. C., & Anderson, C. A. (1995). Effects of frustration justification on hostile aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, *21*, 359-369.
- Ellsworth, P. C., & Scherer, K. R. (2003). Appraisal processes in emotion. In R. J. Davidson, H. Goldsmith, & K. R. Scherer (Eds.), *Handbook of the affective sciences* (pp. 572-595). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geen, R. G. (1998). Aggression and antisocial behavior. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 317-356). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

---

## FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

---

### Definition

The fundamental attribution error describes perceivers' tendency to underestimate the impact of situational factors on human behavior and to overestimate the impact of dispositional factors. For instance, people

often tend to believe that aggressive behavior is caused by aggressive personality characteristics (dispositional factor) even though aggressive behavior can also be provoked by situational circumstances (situational factor).

### History

The term *fundamental attribution error* was created in 1977 by social psychologist Lee Ross. However, research on the fundamental attribution error goes back to the 1950s when social psychologists Fritz Heider and Gustav Ichheiser started to investigate lay perceivers' understanding of the causes of human behavior. Interest in the fundamental attribution error experienced a peak in the 1970s and 1980s when a general notion within social psychology was to discover shortcomings in human judgment.

Notwithstanding its widely accepted significance for social psychology, the fundamental attribution error has also been the subject of controversies regarding its general nature. On the one hand, critics argued that the fundamental attribution error does not occur for everyone under any circumstances, which challenges the adequacy of the label *fundamental*. On the other hand, critics claimed that there is no unambiguous criterion that could specify the real causes of human behavior, thus challenging the adequacy of the term *error*. Irrespective of these controversies, the fundamental attribution error is generally regarded as a very important phenomenon for social psychology, as it often leads to surprised reactions to research findings demonstrating a strong impact of situational factors on human behavior.

### Evidence

From a general perspective, evidence for the fundamental attribution error comes from three different lines of research. First, numerous studies have shown that people tend to infer stable personality characteristics from observed behavior even when this behavior could also be due to situational factors. For example, students may infer a high level of dispositional anxiety from a fellow student's nervous behavior during a class presentation, even though such nervous behavior may simply be the result of the anxiety-provoking situation. This tendency to draw correspondent dispositional inferences from situationally constrained behavior is usually called the *correspondence bias*. In the present example, the fundamental attribution error can contribute to the correspondence bias when

## 368 Fundamental Attribution Error

perceivers do not believe that giving a class presentation is anxiety provoking. Thus, perceivers will infer that the presenter must be an anxious person, even though most people would show the same level of behavioral anxiety during a class presentation.

A second line of research on the fundamental attribution error is concerned with surprised reactions that are often elicited by social psychological findings. Consistent with social psychology's notion that human behavior is strongly influenced by situational factors, several studies have shown that everyday people often do not help other individuals in an emergency situation when other people are present, that everyday people are willing to administer life-threatening electric shocks to other individuals upon request by an experimenter, and that everyday people engage in sadistic, torturing behavior simply because they are assigned to a superior social role. These findings have provoked surprised reactions not only among lay people but also among professional psychologists. One reason for these reactions is that perceivers tend to underestimate how simple changes in the situation can lead everyday people to engage in immoral behavior.

A third line of research on the fundamental attribution error is concerned with cultural differences in lay perceivers' explanations of human behavior. A large number of cross-cultural studies have shown that people in Western societies tend to explain human behavior in terms of stable personality characteristics, whereas people in East Asian societies tend to explain human behavior in terms of situational factors. For example, a school massacre may be described in terms of the abnormal personality of the perpetrator in Western cultures, whereas the same massacre may be described in terms of the perpetrator's situation in East Asian cultures. This difference is assumed to have its roots in a more general difference between Western and East Asian worldviews. Whereas Western societies tend to stress the independence and uniqueness of each individual (individualism), East Asian cultures tend to stress the connectedness and the relation of the individual to the social context (collectivism). This difference, in turn, leads to a stronger focus on characteristics of the individual in Western cultures and to a stronger focus on characteristics of the individual's situation in East Asian cultures.

### Correspondence Bias

The fundamental attribution error is often associated with another social psychological phenomenon: the

correspondence bias. The correspondence bias refers to perceivers' tendency to infer stable personality characteristics from other people's behavior even when this behavior was caused by situational factors. Originally, the terms *fundamental attribution error* and *correspondence bias* were used interchangeably to refer to one and the same phenomenon, namely, perceivers' tendency to underestimate the impact of situational (relative to dispositional) factors on human behavior. However, recent research has shown that the correspondence bias can also be due to factors that do not imply an underestimation of situational factors. Rather, perceivers sometimes commit the correspondence bias because they consider situational factors to have a strong impact on human behavior. Drawing on these findings, many researchers in the field now distinguish between the fundamental attribution error and the correspondence bias, viewing them as two different (though sometimes related) phenomena. Specifically, the term *fundamental attribution error* is now used to describe people's tendency to underestimate the causal impact of situational factors on human behavior and to overestimate the impact of dispositional factors. In contrast, the term *correspondence bias* is used to describe people's tendency to infer stable personality characteristics from observed behavior even when this behavior could also be due to situational factors (which may or may not be due to an underestimation of situational factors).

### Explanations

From a general perspective, explanations of the fundamental attribution error have focused on (a) cognitive mechanisms, (b) motivational influences, and (c) general worldviews.

With regard to cognitive mechanisms, it has been argued that actors usually have a higher perceptual salience than situations. As such, observed behavior often forms a perceptual unit with the actor, but not with the situation in which it occurs. This mechanism leads to different outcomes for actors who generally see the situation they are responding to but do not see themselves engaging in a particular behavior. This explanation is supported by research showing that only observers tend to attribute a stronger impact to dispositional as compared to situational factors, whereas actors tend to attribute a stronger impact to situational as compared to dispositional factors.

With regard to motivational influences, it has been argued that the fundamental attribution error implies

a general tendency to see human behavior as controlled by the individual rather than by situational factors. Specifically, lack of personal control over one's actions would imply that individuals may not be responsible for their actions, thus undermining the social and legal basis of many modern societies. As such, people are sometimes motivated to downplay the impact of situational factors on human behavior to protect the general notion of personal responsibility.

Finally, it has been argued that the fundamental attribution error has its roots in an individualist worldview that sees each individual as independent and unique. This explanation is derived from cross-cultural research, showing that people in collectivist cultures attribute a stronger weight to situational factors than do people in individualist cultures.

*Bertram Gawronski*

*See also* Actor–Observer Asymmetries; Attributions; Attribution Theory; Bystander Effect; Correspondence

Bias; Milgram's Obedience to Authority Studies; Stanford Prison Experiment

#### Further Readings

- Gawronski, B. (2004). Theory-based bias correction in dispositional inference: The fundamental attribution error is dead, long live the correspondence bias. *European Review of Social Psychology, 15*, 183–217.
- Hamilton, D. L. (1998). Dispositional and attributional inferences in person perception. In J. M. Darley & J. Cooper (Eds.), *Attribution and social interaction* (pp. 99–114). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ross, L. D. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 10, pp. 173–220). New York: Academic Press.
- Ross, L. D., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.