THINKING · ONE PAGE EXPLAINER

Fundamental attribution error

Judging others by their character and yourself by your circumstances.

The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to explain other people's behavior by their character and your own behavior by your situation. When they are late, they are inconsiderate. When you are late, traffic was bad. Everyone does this, and it distorts relationships, workplaces, and the story you tell yourself about yourself.

HOW IT DISTORTS

Judging others
You see the behavior and read straight through to a trait. Rude. Careless. Lazy. Selfish. The person becomes the label.

Explaining yourself
You see the same behavior in yourself and reach for the situation. You were rushed. You did not sleep. You had a lot going on. And usually you did.

In conflict
It escalates disagreement because each side attributes the other's behavior to bad character while attributing their own to constraints.

In parenting and teaching
A child's difficulty gets read as a personality problem rather than as a fit problem with the environment. The environment is often easier to change than the personality.

In self-criticism
Some people reverse it: they judge themselves by character and everyone else by circumstances. That is the mirror image, and it drives depression more than it drives insight.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

- Before assigning a trait to someone, ask what situation could produce the same behavior in you. Usually you can find one.
- Before assigning yourself a trait after a bad moment, ask what circumstance was in play. Usually you can find one, and it might be worth addressing.
- Note the asymmetry when it appears. You do not have to overcorrect. You just have to see it.

Named by social psychologist Lee Ross in 1977, building on earlier work by Fritz Heider on how people explain behavior.

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