

# Attribution Bias

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss attribution bias, and how it manifests itself among both groups and individuals. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Attribution Bias at the Individual Level
2. Attribution Bias at the Group Level
3. Attribution Bias in Conflict

## 1. Attribution Bias at the Individual Level

**Attribution bias** is a cognitive tendency to give positive traits to ourselves or those that are like us, and more negative traits to people that we perceive as unlike us.

In previous lessons, we've discussed the manifestation of attribution bias at the group level, but it also occurs at the individual level.

When it comes to our own successes, we tend to view them as stemming from some innate quality.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you do well on a test, you may think, "I studied hard because I'm very committed to my schoolwork," or "I'm really good at this subject." Likewise, you may think this way about a particular person who you see as being similar to you: "She's a lot like me. We're both really good at this subject, so she'd ace the test."



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Attribution Bias**

A tendency to assign more positive traits to members of one's own group and to assign more negative traits to non-members.

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## 2. Attribution Bias at the Group Level

Just as we tend to think positively about ourselves, and attribute our successes to our innate qualities, we apply this thinking to situations involving groups. There are two types of groups:

- In-groups

- Out-groups

The **in-group** is a group that we define ourselves as being part of. This could be a social group, a special interest group, an academic group, or any group comprised of people that we perceive as being similar to us in some way.

The **out-group** is a group that we do not identify as members of. We perceive the people in this group as different or dissimilar from us.

Because we don't identify with the out-group, attribution bias makes it easier to attribute more negative traits to the members of that group.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Say you were admitted to a school on a science scholarship, and you tend to spend time with other students who came to study science. Someone in one of your classes was accepted to the school on an athletic scholarship. You perceive yourself as being very good at this particular subject, so if you do poorly on the first test, you might attribute it to an outside factor, such as not feeling well that day. Or if someone in your group does well, you might think, "They are a science major, so of course they got a good grade."

When it comes to the person with the athletic scholarship, you know they are good at sports, but you don't necessarily think this person is innately smart. So when they ace the test, you might think, "That was pure luck. Or maybe somebody is helping them. I wonder who helped them out on that one." Or if someone in this group doesn't do well, it might be your tendency to think, "What do you expect? They only got in here on their athletic scholarship."

In contrast to how we view ourselves and our in-group, when it comes to a member of an out-group, we tend to attribute the negative to innate qualities and the positive to pure luck. This is how attribution bias works.

We want to give our groups positive qualities because we self-identify with these groups. Thus, the more strongly we identify with any particular group, the more superior we tend to think that group is.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **In-Group**

A group in which a given person defines herself or himself a member.

##### **Out-Group**

A group in which a given person does not define himself or herself.

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## 3. Attribution Bias in Conflict

Naturally, this perception of superiority can lead to conflict.

### IN CONTEXT

In the United States, the two largest political parties are the Democrats and the Republicans. If somebody feels very strongly about one of these parties, they might have a tendency to blame any negative economic, cultural, or moral issues on that other party.

On the other hand, if something should threaten the whole nation, these factions may come together in support of the country because they all identify as Americans, and they see themselves as superior to whoever is threatening them.

This tendency to attribute the positive traits to ourselves, and the negative traits to those we see as unlike us, can escalate conflicts.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If there is a rally or a protest, one side of the conflict may be the protestors, and the other side may be the police. The police may look at this particular group of demonstrators as a threat to the law and order of the community, while the demonstrators may look at the police as holders of the system.

The more each side ascribes these types of traits to the other, the easier it is for the conflict to escalate. This is because when we feel this strong sense of superiority within our own group, we tend to stereotype everybody on the other side.

**Stereotyping** is looking at a whole group as though everybody in that group is alike, ascribing certain traits and tendencies to the group as a whole instead of seeing people as individuals.

When we have that tendency, we then sometimes blame that particular group for things that are beyond its control. That group may have had no part in certain events, but we wrongly see it as somehow responsible for those things.



#### BIG IDEA

Conflicts often start with the way we perceive others who are not like us. We have a tendency towards attribution bias, which leads us to think more negatively about those that we see as dissimilar to us, whether it be individuals or groups.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Stereotyping

Forming a belief that certain general trends or traits of a group (culture) apply equally strongly to all individual members of that group; perceiving people as simplistic representatives of abstract cultural traits rather than as individuals.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that attribution bias, or the tendency to attribute positive traits to ourselves and those like us, and negative traits to those not like us, can exist at both the **individual level** and the **group level**. You now understand that **attribution bias plays a role in conflict** because of the tendency to stereotype, or ascribe certain traits to a group as a whole instead of viewing the members of that group as individuals. This type of thinking can easily escalate a conflict, as can blaming statements based on that thinking. Good luck!

Source: this work is adapted from sophia author marlene johnson



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**Stereotyping**

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