



**Self-Awareness and Analytical Thinking:  
Overcoming the Pitfalls of the Attribution Process**

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According to the attribution theory, the average person tends to develop perceptions heavily influenced by bias (Ross, L., 1977, p. 174). This may lead them to draw misguided conclusions about a situation, person or oneself. These errors in judgment may originate from an underlying need for validation. In Mark Manson's book 'Everything is F\*\*\*\*\*' (2019), he states that in the grand scheme of things, each individual has a negligible impact on the world and therefore is of little importance (p. 10). He also proposes that humans do not truly possess free will and that self-control is an 'illusion' (pp. 20-46). This is what he refers to as the 'Uncomfortable Truth' that people refuse to accept. This would suggest that individuals do not matter, but desire significance. They may even require it to protect their mental wellbeing. That is, humans may rely on feelings of self-worth and security that can be provided by positive affirmation and a strong sense of control. This may be the driving factor behind the existence of attribution bias. This essay delves into various types of attribution bias, and proposes the reasons they exist. In addition, it explores ways to regulate attribution bias through the development of emotional intelligence and adjustment of human cognition.

If humans indeed have a basic need to feel worthy and secure, they may have a natural tendency to convince themselves they have some level of influence over the unpredictable events in their lives. The results of Friedland, Keinan and Regev's study (1992) lead to the conclusion that people tend to seek activities that heighten their sense of control when faced with overwhelming stress. In fact, this type of response to distress has been proven to improve the overall health of individuals (Lilienfeld, S., Lynn, S.J., Namy, L., Woolf, N., Jamieson, G., Marks, A. and Slaughter, V., 2014, p. 585). To feel worthy, people may want to feel that they have a significant impact on society and the world. This would involve having a global scope of control, rather than specific. Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006) indicates that humans typically believe they have more control over situations than they actually do (p. 4). In terms of the attribution theory, this means that individuals are more likely to have an internal locus of control. Furthermore, individuals are more inclined to rely too heavily on personality traits as causal factors, and thus fail to recognize the importance of uncontrollable or external factors such as those presented by the environment. This is a common shortcoming people have when assigning causation, and is referred to as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, L., 1977, p. 184). By believing that one's dispositions determine outcomes, particularly positive ones, one may experience a comforting sense of control and higher self-esteem. This may in turn reduce the feelings of anxiety

associated with a 'lack of perceived control' (Nanda, M. M., Kotchick, B. A., & Grover, R. L., 2012). Everyone falls victim to the fundamental attribution error at times, especially when describing the actions of others.

Individuals are more likely to use situational pressures as causal factors when describing their own behaviour, and dispositions to describe the behaviour of others. Psychologists call this the actor-observer bias (Malle, B. F., 2006, p. 895). This type of attribution bias may mitigate anxiety induced by feelings of inadequacy that arise from failed attempts to reach a goal. Such feelings may be more often experienced by individuals who make attributions with high degree of stability, which suggests a more internal locus of control and therefore a higher likelihood of blaming oneself. Along with feelings of incompetency, one may experience anxiety induced by inconsistencies in their apparent moral standards. By applying external factors more than internal ones, an individual may reduce their perceived level of control of the situation and deflect blame for unfair outcomes. Consequently, their integrity remains protected, and their anxiety levels remain stable. However, the individual engaging in this attribution bias may be less likely to take responsibility for their actions and rectify or learn from their mistakes. Studies by Bulman, R. J., & Wortman, C. B. (1977) depict attributions of blame to oneself when at fault to be a more efficient coping technique when compared with the false attribution of blame to others. Despite these findings, when making excuses for oneself, an individual may attribute blame to others involved, pointing out their dispositions and making indirect connections between those dispositions and the resulting negative outcome. People are generally inclined to accept responsibility for successes whilst denying to have much contribution to failures (Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L., 2006, p. 4). This self-affirming thought process is called the self-serving bias and can also be thought of as a defense mechanism, which Freud, A. (1937) describes as being essential for mental health. This strengthens the notion that humans may thrive on a balance of false validation and acceptance of the truth.

If humans truly require such methods to maintain good psychological health, this could pose as an explanation for the habit that humans have exhibited throughout history to attribute blame to victims of abuse (Lamb, S., 1999, p. 6). A classic example of this is when a German citizen who visited a Nazi concentration camp after the conclusion of World War II made the comment 'what terrible criminals these prisoners must have been to receive such treatment', when referring to the Jews who were unjustly massacred and kept imprisoned under horrific conditions (Baumeister,

R. F., & Bushman, B. J., 2017, p. 318). There are a couple of reasons in particular that may explain this behaviour, both seemingly to obtain peace of mind. The first may be to mitigate anxiety induced by uncertainty surrounding the amount of power one sees themselves as having. The second may target anxiety produced by the knowledge of the existence of injustice in the world, and fear of being treated unequally or harshly. Both are an example of what is known as defensive-attribution bias (Burger, J. M., 1981). By convincing oneself to believe that the world is fair and that good things happen to good people, an individual may mitigate levels of anxiety enough to cope with the inevitable occurrence of uncontrollable and/or unjust events. This concept is commonly referred to as the 'just-world' fallacy (Burger, J. M., 1981, p. 507).

It seems to be the case that attribution bias is a form of coping as well as a defense mechanism. That is, an individual may or may not be aware of the attribution process, and it may help them feel that they are capable and deliberate in their actions. It may also help them to feel that they have a global scope of control, thus easing their mind. In particular, it may protect individuals against low self-esteem and feelings of helplessness as well as doubt related to one's perceived level of integrity. As a result, this may also protect one from overwhelming feelings of anxiety that arise from such uncertainties. Whilst these strategies may be essential for humans to function, they may also cloud judgement. Self and social awareness may assist one in the regulation of this bias. That is, it may help balance the human need to selectively accept some truths and deny others. By denying some truths, individuals will encounter incongruence. According to the cognitive dissonance theory, when this happens, one may alter conflicting cognitions or adopt a new one to remove this inconsistency (Lilienfeld, S et al. 2014). This is a layout of the process people go through when making attributions. For example, if an individual is found guilty of subtle racism in the workplace, they may justify their actions by taking social pressures into account, thus diminishing the discrepancy between the belief that they are a good person and the fact that they promoted racism. The first step to managing attribution bias requires one to develop the ability to identify when it happens. Once this is accomplished, steps can be taken to reduce the negative effects of these biases by replacing one's thought process with more beneficial forms of cognitive control. For example, when considering the scenario involving the racist employee, an emotionally intelligent individual's response would be to accept responsibility for one's actions and conform to the normative

social influence by internalizing equality. As a result, anxiety is mitigated and integrity is strengthened through more ethical methods. The employee has simultaneously achieved a good level of self-enhancement and self-assessment.

The forms of attribution bias analyzed in this essay all seem to display a common theme. That is, they allow one to achieve self-efficacy and healthy anxiety levels through the reinforcement of false perceptions of oneself and the world. People's strengths are validated, and their shortcomings minimised, increasing self-esteem. An internal locus of control is strengthened, and as a result psychological health improves. However, being aware of the negative implications of attribution bias and learning to control one's thoughts and attitudes as a result, can help people process and deal with situations systematically. This ability to observe one's own thoughts and behaviours may allow an individual to experience the positive effects of attribution bias whilst avoiding a distorted reality and ill judgment that often result from such bias.

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