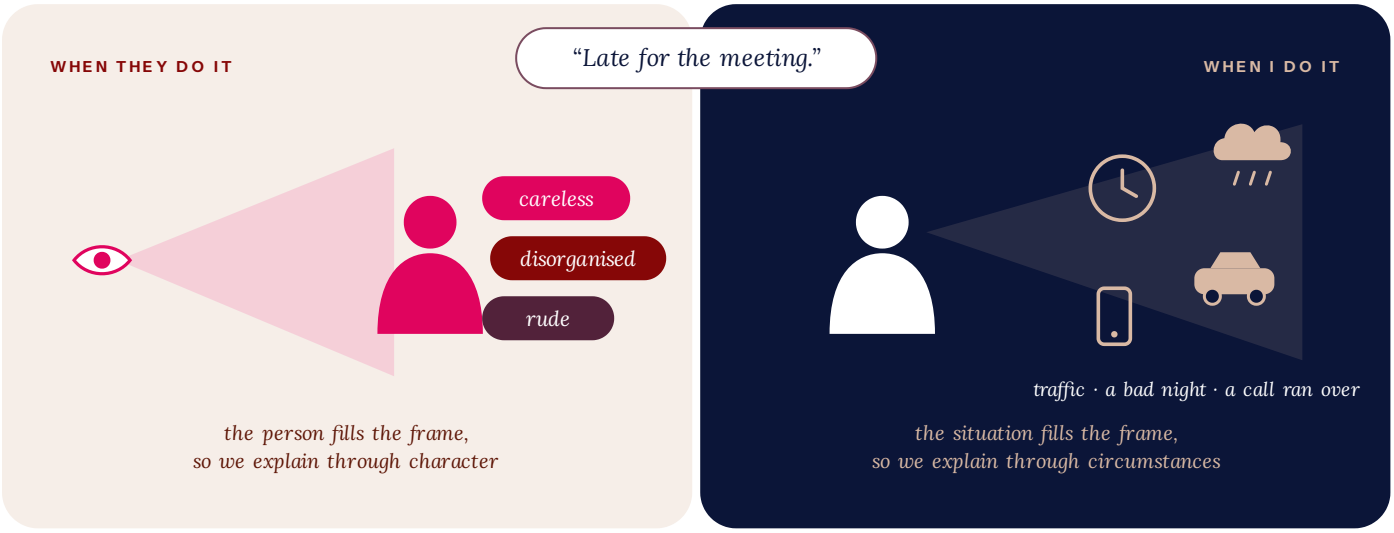
The Fundamental Attribution Error

LEARN · REFLECT · THINKING PATTERNS

Why we explain other people's behaviour by their character, and our own by circumstances

When we watch someone else, we tend to explain what they do by who they are, and underestimate the pressures of their situation. Lee Ross named this the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977); it is also called the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).



01 Why it happens

an efficient shortcut with a blind spot

The person is what we see

When we watch someone, they are the most visible part of the scene. Their circumstances are often invisible to us.

We know our own context

When it's us, we know about the traffic, the bad night, the pressure we were under.

Character is quicker

A trait such as "lazy" or "rude" is a fast, tidy explanation. Weighing the situation takes more effort (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

02 Where it shows up

everyday, and in close relationships

With others

Judging a colleague, a partner, a stranger in traffic, or someone in the news, through a single moment.

"They're just that kind of person."

With ourselves, sometimes in reverse

Some people, especially when feeling low or self-critical, do the opposite: blaming their own character and excusing everyone else.

"It's because I'm useless."

03 Why it matters

small judgements, big effects

In relationships

Reading a partner's or friend's behaviour as "who they are" can turn one hard moment into a fixed story, and fuel conflict.

In how we see groups

The same shortcut can harden into stereotypes when one person's behaviour is taken to represent many.

In how we see ourselves

When the error points inward, a single mistake can feel like proof of a flawed character.

04 Catching it in the moment

four quick questions

Name the label

What word did I just use about them?

Widen the frame

What else might explain this?

Swap places

How would I explain it if I'd done it?

Hold it lightly

Is one moment enough to judge a whole person?

A MORE NUANCED PICTURE

The core tendency to over-read character from behaviour is well documented. A related idea, that we always excuse ourselves while blaming others (the "actor–observer" difference), has much weaker support than once thought (Malle, 2006). The aim is not to stop judging, but to judge more fairly.

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05 Same behaviour, two explanations

try reading these both ways

THE BEHAVIOUR	CHARACTER EXPLANATION	SITUATION EXPLANATION
Didn't reply to a message	*"They don't care."*	*They're overwhelmed, or saw it at a bad moment.*
Snapped at a shop assistant	*"What an unpleasant person."*	*They may have just had bad news.*
Cut in on the motorway	*"Selfish driver."*	*They might be rushing to an emergency.*
Forgot a birthday	*"They don't value me."*	*Something big may be happening for them.*
Was quiet at the party	*"They're stuck-up."*	*They may feel shy, or out of place.*
Missed a deadline	*"They're lazy."*	*They might be carrying more than I know.*

06 Try it yourself

a behaviour that bothered me

What someone did

My first explanation

What might have been going on for them?

pressures, history, things I can't see

07 Turn it around

the fairness check

A time I did something similar

How I explained it to myself

Would I judge them differently now?

no change ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ quite differently

A fairer, fuller explanation

08 Reflection

what am I noticing?

Where I tend to over-read character, in others or myself

To remember, or to bring to a session
if you are working with someone

SOURCES

Gilbert, D. T., & Malone, P. S. (1995). The correspondence bias. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(1), 21–38.
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Ross, L. (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). Academic Press.

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