

Ultimate Attribution Error

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The ultimate attribution error is a term in Social Psychology which refers to a bias people commonly have towards members of an outgroup. Specifically, they view negative acts committed by outgroup members as a stable trait of the outgroup, and view positive acts committed by outgroup members as exceptions to normal behavior. The term is a variation on another common cognitive error, the fundamental attribution error.

Ultimate Attribution Error is attributing behaviors of entire groups to their stereotypes. In Psychology, the Ultimate Attribution Error is considered one of the roots of prejudice.

Ultimate Attribution Error

The ultimate attribution error is a cognitive error committed by prejudiced people in which negative behaviors are attributed to the personality of outgroup members, and are extended to all of the members of that outgroup. Negative behaviors by ingroup members are attributed to situational, or external causes, and do not have the same impact on judgments of the ingroup as a group. (Pettigrew, 1979). Essentially, people who commit this fallacy will usually see members of other races or religions as genetically and/or dispositionally inferior or flawed, while people from their own racial or religious ingroup, upon committing the same negative behaviors, are good people who are dealing with specific situations the best they can. Conversely, people who commit this error see positive acts from outgroup members as exceptions to the rule, or attribute these positive actions to unfair advantages, by which the outgroup member is "privileged" (i.e. affirmative action) (Whitley & Kite, p. 87).

The ultimate attribution error is different from the fundamental attribution error in that it is used to describe entire groups of people, whereas the fundamental attribution error has to do with dispositional attributions that apply only to an individual.

Studies Demonstrating the Ultimate Attribution Error

The ultimate attribution error was demonstrated in 1976 by Birt Duncan (Whitley & Kite, 2010). He asked White participants to watch a video of a man shoving another man. One video had a Caucasian male shoving another Caucasian male and a second video had an African American male shoving a Caucasian male. When the participants watched the first video they concluded that the Caucasian male doing the shoving was attributed to having fun (a situational factor), but when they watched the second video they attributed the African American's behavior to an aggressive personality (Duncan, 1979). The results of Duncan's study demonstrates that ultimate attribution error is more likely to occur when there are negative associations with members of an outgroup due to previous conflict or certain situations that were experienced (Whitley & Kite, 2010).