Module 7: Biases - Fundamental Attribution Error

We see that heuristics of thinking fast or thinking under uncertainty can lead to important cognitive biases. Now, there are very many different biases as you can see and it would be impossible for me to talk about all of them. Therefore, in addition to the biases that we've already discussed as part of our discussion on heuristics, am going to focus on a few widely prevalent ones in this video. I'd like to begin with a discussion of the fundamental attribution error - an error in reasoning that is incredibly common and also very troublesome. When we try to figure out why an object or a person behaved in some way, we're prone to a dispositional bias. That is, we see behavior as an outcome of dispositions of people, that is, we see people's behavior as an outcome of who they are, their traits, abilities, attitudes and motives, rather than as a response to a particular context or situation. This bias routinely causes us to make the fundamental attribution error. Which is a tendency to mistakenly regard dispositions of the object or person as the primary cause of behavior, while ignoring important situational or context factors.

In one famous experiment, a very long time ago, psychologists asked one group of college participants to read an essay in favour of Castro's Cuba. And they had another group read an essay opposing Castro's Cuba. The first group was told that an instructor in political science had asked students to write an essay in favor of Cuba and what they were reading was one of those essays. And the second group was told that the political science instructor had asked students to write an essay opposing Castro's Cuba. Logically, participants should not have felt that they had learned anything about the participants' true attitudes. But, in fact, participants who read the favorable essay assumed that the student who wrote it was, in fact, in favor of Castro's Cuba. And those who read the unfavourable essay assumed that the student who wrote it was opposed to Castro's Cuba.

In another classic study conducted by Lee Ross Teresa Amabile and Julia Steinmetz in 1977, students participated in a study where they had to play out a TV quiz format. Two students were randomly assigned to the roles of quiz master and contestant ad the observers were aware of this random assignment. The goal of the quiz master or questioner was to take advantage of the esoteric knowledge that they had and ask trivia questions that the contestant likely didn't know the answer to. For example, what is the sweet-smelling waxy stuff that comes from whales and is used as a base for perfume? You might think that it would have been amply clear to both participants and the observers that the questioner had a big advantage by virtue of his role. He could display some impressive knowledge because of situational reasons. The quiz master was the one creating the question so of course they'll know the answer and they were told to try to pick a question that the contestant won't know so the situation is really the reason why the quiz master knew the answer and the contestant didn't. Yet, despite knowing this, observers who watched the quiz take place rated the questioner as far more knowledgeable than either the contestant or the average university student.

This example highlights how we have a tendency to attribute disposition to actors when it comes to the roles that they play. We have a tendency to think of them as actually having the traits of the characters that they portray even though again rationally we know that they're not you know spontaneously coming up with this dialogue. It's being written by writers they're being told what to say they're being told how to react to particular situations and so they don't necessarily have the traits of the people that they portray. Yet, we have the tendency to assume they, do which is why celebrities like Amitabh Bachan or Salman Khan and other leading male protagonists have the following they do.

Notice how the representativeness heuristic, the failure to appreciate the law of large numbers and the fundamental attribution error operate together in generating our mistakes about how much we can learn from observation of a single behavior. Deepa gave the panhandler hundred rupees. That's an act that's representative of generosity. So, she must be a generous person. I don't pay much attention to the context, which may have been one in which most people would have given the panhandler hundred rupees. And I don't do much checking against other behavior by Deepa. There's no recognition that a single act doesn't constitute a great deal of evidence. These kinds of powerful biases operating together help to account for our massive failure to appreciate how little we actually learn from a single behavior.

So why do we make this fundamental attribution error? why is it that we tend to assume dispositional factors instead of situational factors drive people's behavior? Well, one reason is that it's easy to do so. When somebody slips and falls on the street, it's easy to say they're clumsy. When a student doesn't turn in his or her work, it's easy to say he or she is lazy. These assessments don't involve any further effort whereas a situational explanation requires us to think about all possible things in the situation that might have influenced this behavior. That takes effort especially since some of those situational factors might not be apparent to us or we might not have any access to that knowledge. This in turn brings us to the actor observer bias. What does this mean? This means that events that occur are different to the actor whom that event impacts versus somebody just observing the event. If you are the actor, situational factors are clear to you. So, if you're walking down the street you can tell when there's a slippery surface and you feel your foot slide on it but somebody just watching you the observer doesn't have access to this situational information. And because these situational factors are less apparent to the observer the actor observer bias occurs. When I asked that person who fell why did you fall they're very likely to say well there was something slippery on the ground. But when we observe events unfolding, we tend to focus on the actors or the people involved and that means when we want to come up with an explanation it's easier to focus on the people involved rather than situational factors that were playing out.

Another explanation for the fundamental attribution error is our tendency to engage in what's called the just world bias. We want to believe that the world is a good, just place, that things are fair, that bad things only happen to bad people and that good things only happen to good people. it's discomforting for us to recognize that it doesn't matter how good of a person you are, bad things can still happen to you. And It would be great if the world actually works that way but now we know that it doesn't work that way. it doesn't matter that you're the greatest person in the world you can still get hit by a bus through no fault of your own, you can still be the victim of a crime, you can be the victim of an accident, you can suffer from an incurable illness and there was maybe nothing you could have done to prevent any of it. Yet, we harbor the just world bias that leads us to think that if something bad happened to somebody then they deserve it. That guy fudged the numbers at work? He's a criminal. Maybe his boss made him. She ate out with all of us but didn't leave a tip. She's a scrooge who doesn't value people who serve us. Maybe she had not got her paycheck and didn't have the money at the point. He took the elevator up just one floor. He's fat and lazy. Maybe he had a medical need to just go up the one floor. As you can see, the fundamental attribution error is very fundamental, and very profound, and very troublesome. The only way to combat it is to remember that everyone makes mistakes and that mistakes happen for a million different reasons and not because people have a problem with themselves that they need to work on.