**Name**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Homeroom**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Assuming the Best of Others***

**Directions:** Read the following article excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

**“Why We Don’t Give Each Other A Break”by Dr. Mark Sherman**

Suppose you made plans to meet up with a friend at 7 o’clock. It’s now 7:30, and the friend still hasn’t arrived. How might you explain this to yourself?

* “I’m sure something really important happened that made it impossible for her to be here on time.”
* “What a jerk! Couldn’t she try a little harder?”

In the first situation, you’re attributing your friend’s lateness to the situation (“Something really important must have come up…”) and in the second you’re attributing it to her character (“What a jerk!”). Research has shown that people are more likely, on average, to choose the second type—the character attribution. This tendency is so strong, in fact, that social psychologist Lee Ross (1977) labeled it the **Fundamental Attribution Error**. This error leads us to blame others for how things turn out and to underestimate[[1]](#footnote-1) how the situation or environment may have played a role in their behavior.

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| --- |
| **Stop and Jot:** Briefly describe a time when someone committed the Fundamental Attribution Error by unfairly blaming you for how something turns out.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

Research on the Fundamental Attribution Error shows us that this bias[[2]](#footnote-2) operates quickly and invisibly, yet can have a huge impact on our decision-making and relationships. It’s one of the biggest barriers to compassion—and it’s easy to see why. It’s hard to feel compassion for someone who we blame for the bad situation they put themselves in. On the other hand, when we make a mistake, we are quick to blame our circumstances and not ourselves. So, how can you overcome this? The next time you feel tempted to make a negative attribution to someone (“What a jerk!”), step back and ask, Could it be something about the situation that is bringing about this person’s behavior? Only then will we have the ability to show each other the compassion and dignity that we deserve.

***Assuming the Best of Others* Reflection Questions**

**Directions:** In your neatest handwriting and in complete sentences, answer the following questions.

1. In your own words, write a definition for the Fundamental Attribution Error.

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1. According to this article, how might we overcome the Fundamental Attribution Error?

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***Assuming the Best of Others* Mini-Practice**

**Directions**: Imagine that you observe other people engage in the following behaviors. Generate two situational attributions for each person’s behavior that could replace the character attribution.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Behavior(s) You Observe** | **Character Attribution** | **Situational Attribution #1** | **Situational Attribution #2** |
| You have one week left before you take the two biggest exams of the semester, and you’re feeling stressed. Three days ago, you called one of your most studious friends to ask if she’d be willing to tutor you before one of the tests, but she never returned your call. | “She only cares about herself and her grades—not about helping others.” |  |  |
| A family member is driving you to school. Suddenly, someone cuts you guys off and speeds ahead. | “What a selfish and impatient driver! He obviously doesn’t care about other people’s safety—he almost hit our car! |  |  |
| You wave hello to a friend who you see in the hallway at school, but he just walks right past without even saying hi back or acknowledging you.”  | “What a fake friend. I knew she wasn’t someone who I should trust.” |  |  |
| Your best friend usually gives you the best birthday presents. However, yesterday was your 13th birthday, and she didn’t even wish you a happy birthday. | “She totally forgot. She must not care about me as much as I care about her. If she really cared, she would’ve remembered!” |  |  |

**Stamp Your Learning for *Assuming the Best of Others***

**Directions:** Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What is the difference between a character attribution and a situational attribution? Provide an example.

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1. Describe a time when someone made a dispositional attribution about you based on your behavior, without considering the role of the environment or the situation in influencing that behavior. How did this make you feel?

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1. In one artful sentence, explain how the Fundamental Attriubtion Error can undermine compassion.

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**Stamp Your Learning for *Assuming the Best of Others* (Continued)**

1. Describe a time when you unfairly judged someone based on their actions without having the full context? If you could go back in time, what could you tell yourself to avoid making the same mistake?

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1. **underestimate**: to think of something as having less influence than it does [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **bias**: a tendency to believe that some people or ideas are better than others [↑](#footnote-ref-2)