

# Module 10: Social Psychology

## Topic 1 Content: Attributions

### Introduction

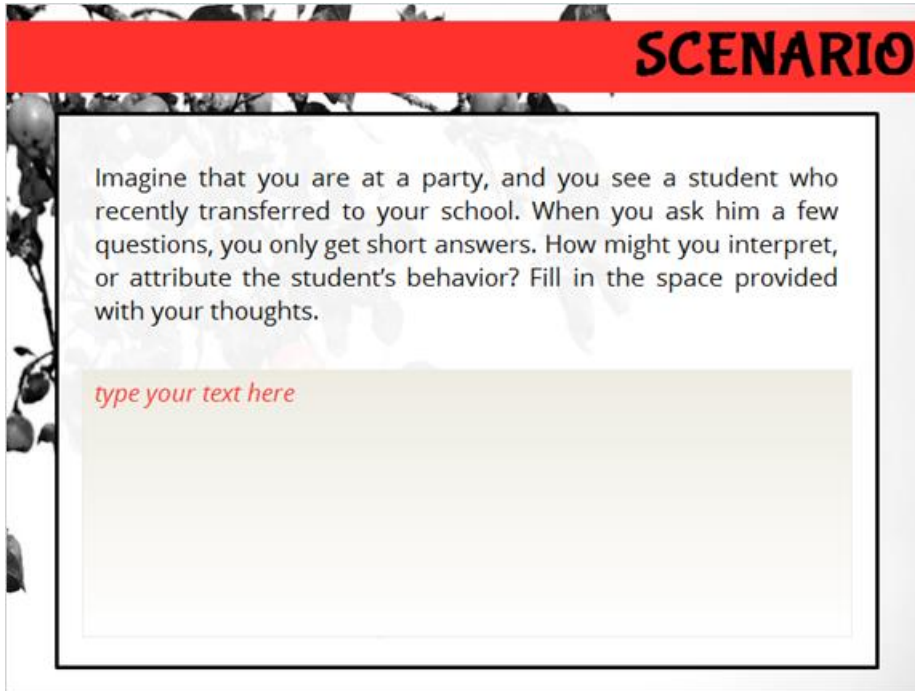


In this interactivity, you will discover different ways you might interpret people's behaviors. Click the **NEXT** button to begin.

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#### Scenario



**SCENARIO**

Imagine that you are at a party, and you see a student who recently transferred to your school. When you ask him a few questions, you only get short answers. How might you interpret, or attribute the student's behavior? Fill in the space provided with your thoughts.

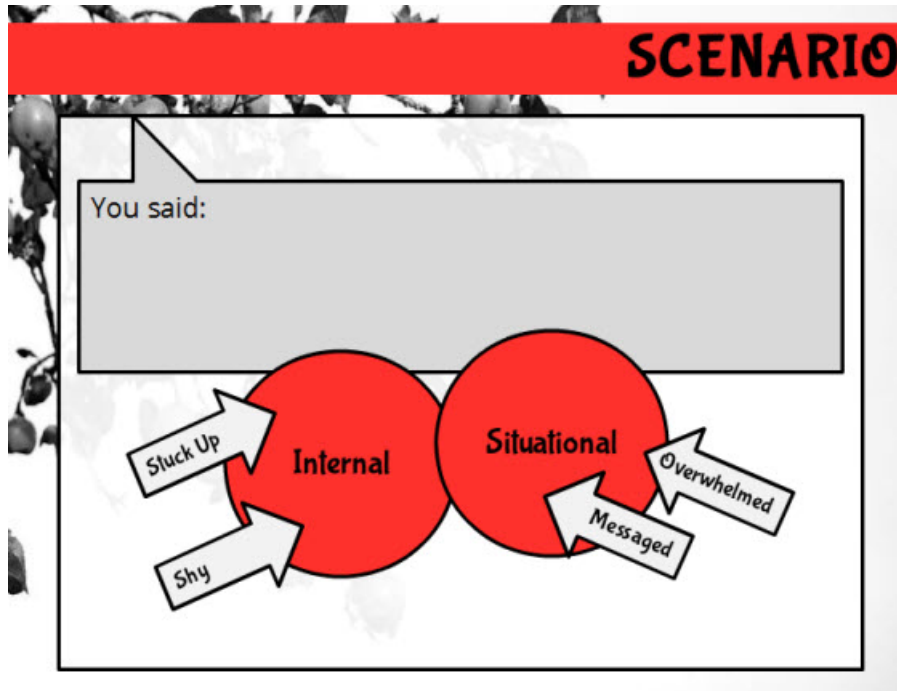
*type your text here*

Imagine you are at a party, and you see a student who recently transferred to your school. When you ask him a few questions, you only get short answers. How might you interpret or attribute the student's behavior? Fill in the space provided with your thoughts.

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#### Scenario Feedback



The diagram features a red banner at the top with the word "SCENARIO" in white, bold, uppercase letters. Below the banner is a white rectangular box with a black border. Inside the box, at the top left, is a grey speech bubble containing the text "You said:". Below the speech bubble are two overlapping red circles. The left circle is labeled "Internal" and has two white arrows pointing towards it from the left, labeled "Stuck Up" and "Shy". The right circle is labeled "Situational" and has two white arrows pointing towards it from the right, labeled "Overwhelmed" and "Messaged".

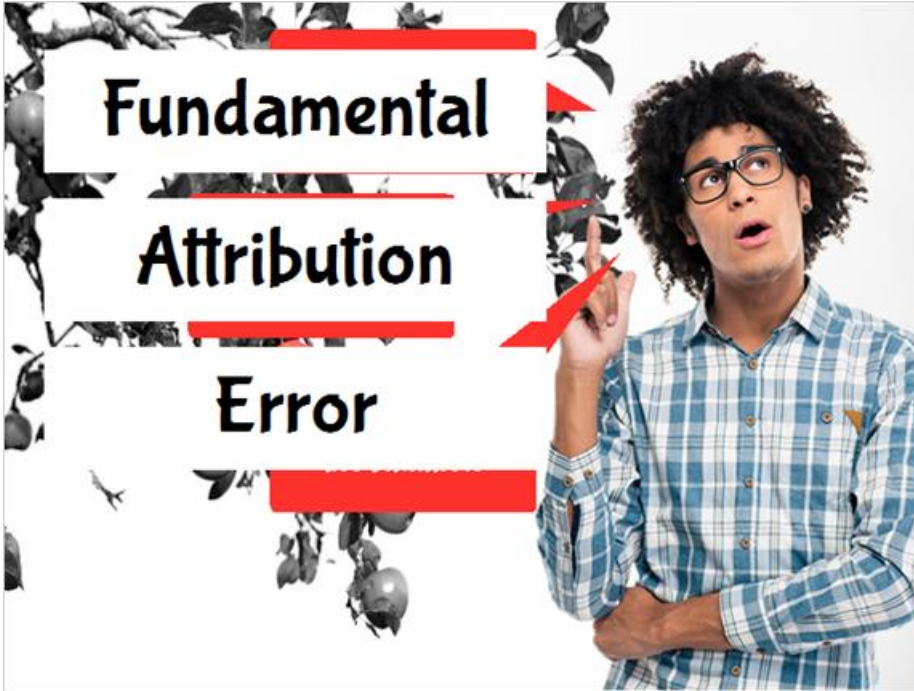
Take a moment to reflect on what you said about the student. Now, think about this for a moment. Did you assume there was something internal in the new student's personality or disposition that caused him to act this way? For example, did you think he was shy or "stuck up?" Or did you consider the ways the specific situation might be affecting his behavior. For example, did you think he felt overwhelmed with recent changes, or that he received a text message from his mom asking him to leave the party early and pick up medicine for his sick brother?

Attributing behaviors to internal factors is called **dispositional attribution**, while attributing behaviors to situational factors is called **situational attribution**.

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#### Fundamental Attribution Error



After learning about the types of attributions, did you re-evaluate your initial judgments about the new student? If so, that is certainly understandable. In fact, it is right in line with social psychology research on attributions. Specifically, the tendency to overestimate the importance of a person's disposition and to underestimate the importance of the situation is so common that it has a name: the **fundamental attribution error**. Many studies done by social psychologists have shown that humans tend to label one another by their disposition, even after very short interactions.

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#### Examples of Attributions

Dispositional Attribution	Situational Attribution
<i>Oh, that waitress was not very nice.</i>	<i>She's nice most days, but today she's covering an extra shift because another waiter didn't show up, and she's running out of energy.</i>

Take a moment to look at a few more examples of dispositional and situational attributions. Chances are you've heard someone say, *Oh, that waitress was not very nice*. This is an example of a dispositional attribution. Conversely, if someone had said, *She's nice most days, but today she's covering an extra shift because another waiter didn't show up, and she's running out of energy*, that would be a situational attribution. Another dispositional attribution would be *Shana's very funny - a real hoot to hang out with!* - opposed to a situational attribution about Shana that states, *Although usually animated in group settings, she has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. You caught her on a good night*.

Now, you give it a try. Click on the example that is a dispositional attribution.

**Correct Feedback:** You selected the correct response. Talking about someone being disorganized and a slow grader is a *dispositional attribution*, because you assume the behavior is an internal part of Mr. James' personality. Talking about how needing to care for his father made Mr. James less effective than usual is a *situational attribution*, because the specific situation is impacting his behavior.

**Incorrect Feedback:** You did not select the correct response. Talking about someone being disorganized and a slow grader is a *dispositional attribution*, because you assume the behavior is an internal part of Mr. James' personality. Talking about how needing to care for his father made Mr. James less effective than usual is a *situational attribution*, because the specific situation is impacting his behavior.

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#### Effects on Interactions



Dispositional attributions might affect your future interactions with the individuals you are judging. They could also affect interactions between these people and anyone else with whom you have shared your attitudes. In this way, the fundamental attribution error can lead not only to you, but also to others being led astray in their judgments about particular individuals.

Moreover, the closer you are to someone, the more likely you are able to make a situational attribution, rather than a dispositional one. For instance, if you pass by your friend in the hallway and she does not wave to you, you are more likely to attribute her behavior to the situation, and wonder if she is okay, or whether you did something to make her angry. You are less likely to suddenly discard your previous experiences with her and think she is an inconsiderate jerk.

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#### Self-Serving Bias



When it comes to attributions for your own behavior, evidence shows that you are likely to engage in a phenomenon called the **self-serving bias**. When things go well for you, you tend to attribute that to your disposition, or to innate characteristics. For example, when a stockbroker makes a trade that ends up paying off handsomely, he is likely to attribute that success not to luck, or to outside factors, but rather to his own wisdom, skill, or insight into the market. Yet next week, when he makes a trade that loses several thousand dollars, his attribution is likely to be situational, saying that the markets turned, or the information he got about that company was bad. Engaged in occasionally, the self-serving bias may simply be one fairly benign way of protecting the stockbroker's ego and self-confidence. But if repeated, it can lead to costly mistakes, for himself and for his clients. Keeping in mind that all people, including yourself, are often guilty of the self-serving bias, can help provide an important corrective, and keep you from missing opportunities to improve yourself and your performance.