

Why Do People Succeed or Fail in Life? Your Answer Matters - Economic Hardship Reporting Project

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Have you ever asked yourself “How did I end up here?” Wondered why you achieved some level of success while others you know have not? Or, conversely, struggled to understand why something bad happened to you, like losing your job or not getting the one you wanted, while your friends’ careers continued to flourish?

Perhaps you have walked by a person experiencing homelessness and unconsciously judged them for their current plight. Or questioned the reasons that led to another person’s success or failure?

How we explain what happens to people in life impacts our motivation, behavior, and attitudes toward others—and ourselves. It may also be at the root of many of our societal issues and political divides. By shedding light on these unconscious assumptions, we can be more aware and grateful for what has helped us along the way and exercise more compassion and understanding of the ups and downs everyone experiences in life.

What is attribution?

First introduced in 1958 by psychologist Fritz Heider and advanced by social psychologist Bernard Weiner in the 1970s, the study of human cause and effect is called “attribution.” In other words, to what do we attribute any given human outcome—from the everyday “How was I able to do that?” to the existential “How did I end up here?” Attribution is the foundation to how we see and judge ourselves and others.

It “provides the building blocks for a lot of the other processes—things like perspective taking, empathy, conceptions of privilege are all downstream consequences of the attributions one engages in,” says Paul K. Piff, associate professor of psychological science at the University of California, Irvine, whose research focuses on issues like social hierarchy, status, and inequality.

For example, why do some people do better economically than others?

Some of us might assume it comes down to their own individual effort, while others might put more weight on a combination of outside forces, such as their education, parents, race, or where they grew up.

At the heart of attribution theory is the question of control, or what factors contribute to outcomes: internal factors within our control (often referred to as dispositional) and external factors (also called situational or contextual) that are outside our control.

Generally speaking, we often succumb to “fundamental attribution error,” which is a tendency to overemphasize the role of internal factors while minimizing the impact of situational ones.

A striking example of this comes from [Piff's Monopoly study](#). In the study, one participant gets significant advantages over another in a game of Monopoly based on a coin flip (twice as much money to start, twice as much money when they pass Go, and the ability to roll two dice vs. their opponent's one). Despite this advantage, the winner—who is always the person who won the coin flip—concludes that their win is the result of factors within their control, like purchasing Park Place, not the contextual coin flip.

You can imagine how this plays out in real life: We judge “winners and losers” not only in games but in our lives, blaming ourselves for failures when complex systemic issues were holding us back or taking credit for successes that were aided by people or forces we may be unaware of or take for granted.

Why does all this matter?

On a personal level, it is critical that we have some sense of control over our own life. Various studies have connected this sense of control to everything from improved health to less apathy and hopelessness.

Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution once commented to me on the belief in the American Dream, where individual control is paramount: “People need hope... but they also need a deeper appreciation of many of the other factors [external] that contribute to where we ended up.”

At the same time, people who are unaware of or under-appreciate the role of external factors can be either overly harsh on themselves during moments of failure or unsympathetic to the plight of others who are less fortunate than they are.

On a societal level, consider some of the most pressing issues of our time

through the lens of attribution:

- **Education:** Why do some students succeed while others fail? Is it because some students try harder or certain schools and teachers offer more support and resources?
- **Climate change:** What is the cause of climate change? Can individuals make a difference in its mitigation?
- **Racism:** Why have minorities historically been marginalized? Is it ongoing systemic racism or historical acts of individuals?

As a colleague who worked at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention once told me, “How we see the problem drives how we create the solution.” So if we see issues through a dispositional lens, we think change happens at the individual level. If we see them as contextual, then systems-level change is a better tool for addressing them. This has profound implications for both what policies get proposed and the likelihood that the public will support them.

How we see attribution is also impacted by our own current status in life. [One study](#) demonstrated that people with lower socioeconomic status were more likely to give external explanations for a whole host of positive or negative outcomes—ranging from “publishing a book, getting into medical school, being laid-off at work to contracting the HIV virus.”

Conversely, [another study](#) found that upper-class executives “were more likely than lower class workers to endorse dispositional explanations of everyday social behaviors and emotions.”

It’s important to note that in any given situation, dispositional and situational factors both almost always play a role. They are not mutually exclusive—yet that is often how it plays out in our thinking. What is needed is a healthy and nuanced way of understanding what happens to ourselves and others.

A healthier sense of attribution

Fortunately, there are many things we can do to create a healthier sense of attribution in our lives and society.

Start with your own life. Both personally and professionally, I’ve struggled with this question of attribution as my life outcomes are significantly different from those of family members and friends I grew up with. I have at different points in my life felt guilty and undeserving about my own success and angry that society has not provided the same breaks or supports to those I love. In [better understanding what my success was](#)

[attributed to](#), guilt was replaced by gratitude, and anger assuaged by a newfound knowledge of how to better support others. Reflecting on your life and having an honest conversation with yourself about “how you ended up here” is a good first step.

Our nonprofit organization, Moving Up Media Lab, has created a few tools that allow you to better assess your own attribution.

The first is a simple quiz called “[What’s Your American Dream Score?](#)” It asks a series of questions about various factors (both internal and external) that may have contributed to where you are in life. At the end, you get a score reflecting how many “headwinds” are working against you or “tailwinds” pushing you forward (concepts from researchers [Shai Davidai and Thomas Gilovich](#)).

Another tool, “[Who Is On Your Dream Team?](#),” breaks it down to a more personal level by providing a series of prompts, where you list the names of people who directly or indirectly helped you become who you are today. At the end, you get a moving illustration of “Your Dream Team.” Users of these tools have told us that they have felt grateful for their own advantages and more understanding of the challenges others face.

Reflect on the lives of others. In a [series of studies](#), Piff and his colleagues tested different activities to see if they could improve people’s perceptions of inequality. In one instance, they provided a brief writing prompt where participants were asked to write short answers to questions like “Why are some people poor and don’t deserve to be?”

Other participants were asked to play 10 minutes of a poverty simulation game called [SPENT](#) that illustrates the various contextual factors that contribute to poverty.

In both instances, participants experienced significant shifts in attitudes, regardless of gender or political party. They found people to be less deserving of their economic circumstances and saw more external causes of poverty. They were also more willing to donate to the “Fight for \$15” campaign designed to raise the federal minimum wage.

Tell better stories. Western culture, particularly in America, places an emphasis on rugged individualism or its modern equivalent of grit. These cultural stories often reinforce fundamental attribution error by focusing on one person’s will or resilience in achieving success.

Yet even within those stories, we can see critical external forces at play. Take the movie *Rocky*, for example. No one would deny how hard Rocky

works to achieve glory in the ring. At the same time, if you watch the original movie more closely, you will see a myriad of external factors that if absent would have prohibited him from succeeding.

For example, he only gets a shot at the championship because another boxer gets injured. He is selected out of a book of local boxers largely because of his Italian name. He at first refuses the offer to fight for the championship until the boxing promoter convinces him otherwise. His loan shark boss gives him time off and money to train. Paulie gives him free steaks every day. Adrian supports him unconditionally, and so on and so on.

When we tell more nuanced stories of attribution, we contribute to a culture that has a healthier and more well-rounded idea of what really brings about life outcomes.

Judge less. It is easy to judge those who don't see attribution similarly to us as either naive or uncaring. Yet attribution, like many other psychological constructs, is complex and often not a conscious choice but rather a reflection of various other influences, ranging from our socioeconomic status to our culture. In other words, our own attribution tendencies have complex attributions.

One example that I find particularly compelling involves the research of Rachel L. Ruttan, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of Toronto. She found that people who had gone through various life struggles and overcome them were often less sympathetic to those who were currently dealing with the same struggle, less so than those who had never experienced it.

For example, someone who quit smoking or lost their job was less sympathetic to someone trying to quit smoking or recently unemployed, compared to someone who never smoked or was fired. This flies in the face of our understanding of empathy. But as Ruttan [hypothesizes](#), the cause could be related to attribution. If people believe that their success is contextual, then their success seems less secure. Conversely, if they believe their success is of their own making, then they will naturally feel more secure in their achievement but also be more likely to judge others as not having sufficient willpower to overcome the struggle as they themselves did.

Work with people's beliefs. Simply understanding attribution, not attempting to change it, can bear fruit. One [study](#) from Ashley Willans, assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, determined that organizations who appealed to wealthier

individuals' internal sense of control in their messaging inspired them to give more to charity.

A note for optimism

Better understanding attribution is a powerful tool for change in our own lives and society as a whole. It asks us to reflect on important questions in a way that is non-threatening. It is devoid of the judgment so inherent in questions about privilege and is more nuanced and encompassing than solutions grounded in grit. It can improve the stories we tell about ourselves and others.

Importantly, as these examples demonstrate, attribution is not a fixed mindset. As Piff states, “If attributions for poverty contribute to tolerance for inequality, they present an accessible and potentially powerful lever for raising opposition to it—and actions to reduce it.”

Small activities, ranging from a quiz to a writing prompt to a few minutes playing a game, can have an outsized, long-lasting impact. In Piff's study involving the poverty simulation game, participants' shift in attitudes about inequality remained the same four months after the original study.

Another person reflecting on their experience taking the American Dream Quiz remarked online, “I'll never see my life the same way again.”

Now imagine if more people had similar experiences. How much more would we give? How much more responsibility would we take? How much kinder could we be to ourselves and to others and how much less judgmental?

A better understanding of attribution can be humbling, expansive, and awe-inspiring. Its exploration is best summarized by this quote from Carl Sagan: “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” Which is to say we will never fully know the exact or complete answer to “How did I end up here?” or other complex questions of attribution, but there is tremendous value just in the asking.

Bob McKinnon is host of the award-winning PBS podcast, Attribution and author of *Actions Speak Loudest: Keeping Our Promise for a Better World*, the best selling children's book, *Three Little Engines* and the weekly newsletter, Moving Up Mondays.

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