



Lesson Title:

Attribution Bias

Course Level:

High School - Undergraduate

Courses: Psychology, Positive Psychology, Management
Class Time: 25-45 minutes
Assignment Time: (optional) 2 hours
Prerequisite: Read Be the Hero
Overview: Understand and apply actor/observer bias.

OBJECTIVES

1. Build personal strength: empathy.
2. Understand actor/observer bias and apply to real-life situations.

ASSIGNMENT

(Optional) Watch the movie *Syriana*.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Who's the Jerk?

Action: READ

Everyone close your eyes for the following two questions.

1. Raise your hand if you know someone who you consider to be a jerk.
2. Raise your hand if you consider yourself to be a jerk.

Action:

Take a rough tally of hands raised for each questions. Share the results.

Discussion:

1. Why does it happen that we all think we know people who are jerks but almost none of us consider ourselves to be jerks?

2. Raise your hand if you have ever acted like a jerk. Why do your “jerk-like” actions not make you consider yourself to be a jerk?
3. Why do we accept the label of jerk for other people so much more easily?
4. In *Be the Hero* the author makes the point that it doesn’t matter if someone is really a jerk or not. Why is that? What do you think of that? How does your desire to think of someone as a jerk affect your ability to respond when others act poorly?

Key Talking Points:

- There are several attribution biases in humans. These biases affect the way we determine who or what was responsible for an event or action. One of these biases is the actor/observer bias.
- When we are the actor we attribute our misdeeds to the extenuating circumstances in the situation. When we are the observer we attribute others’ misdeeds to who they are as a person.

2. *Be the Hero* Review

Discussion:

1. In *Be the Hero* Jeff had epiphanies when he saw Yvette, Greg, Marie, Siena, and himself in new ways. What unique lesson can we learn from his shift in how he saw each of those characters?
2. When was a time in your life when you have had an epiphany that someone was a better person than you had originally given them credit for?

Talking Points:

- With Yvette Jeff had to confront the possibility that he was the source of her pain.
- With Greg Jeff recognized how automatic his responses were. These responses led him down justifiable and rational but completely unproductive and unhelpful paths.
- With Marie Jeff realized that he was making her into a villain which almost assured that her story and his were contrary to one another.
- With Siena Jeff discovered that these stories could only take him so far.
- With himself Jeff found that he was ignoring his own misdeeds and assuming he had acted effectively and appropriately in each situation.

3. Real-Life Scenarios

Action:

Brainstorm situations in which students perceived someone to be a jerk. Politics provides ample scenarios in which each side has difficulty understanding how or why the other acts the way they do.

(Optional Example #1) Old joke

- Question – What do you call a Democrat who has been mugged?
- Answer – A Republican.

(Optional Example #2) Movie – Syriana

- Movie can be given as assignment.
- Movie generates empathy for terrorist characters.

For each situation, give groups of 4-8 students 3-5 minutes to discuss what each person in the scenario might not know or be considering about the other.

Discussion:

1. What stands out to you from that exercise?
2. How was it different working on issues with stronger emotional content?
3. How would it affect your life to consistently override your actor/observer bias to intentionally seek out explanations for others' misdeeds?

Key Talking Points:

- Strong emotions strengthen a cognitive bias called the confirmation bias in which we seek information that confirms our already formed opinions. If we believe someone is insensitive, cruel, manipulative, self-centered, we become more apt to notice actions that confirm those views. We also become ineffective at recognizing behaviors that contradict our opinions.