Learning Outcomes

● After the session and appropriate reading you should be able to:

  ○ Have an understanding of what an attribution is.

  ○ Demonstrate an understanding of several attribution theories.

  ○ Have considered cognitive accounts of how and why people explain events.

  ○ Describe a number of errors and biases in the attributional process

What is an Attribution

- Attribution is the process of assigning causal explanation to own or others' behaviour
- Helps us understand our own and others' behaviour
  - Predict & Control social world (Heider, 1958)
- To infer intentions and behaviour – predict another's behaviour in future
- Quality ascribed to or imputed to a person or situation.
- To assign essential characteristics
- Categorise as a result

Attribution Process

- "What CAUSED this behaviour?

- .....the process of assigning a cause to one's own or another's behaviour" (Hogg & Vaughan, 1995).

- ".....the attempt to identify what factors gave rise to what outcomes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

- Attribution theory not a single theory
  - General approach to understanding how people explain causes of behaviour

Why use Causal Explanation

- Impose understanding, predictability & control upon events
- causal explanations impose clarity & lessen ambiguity
- Causal explanations simplify complex behaviours & facilitate the creation of inferences (or stereotypes)
- Social psychologists use attribution theories to understand causal inferences.

Attribution Process

- The factors & perceptions people use in order to create a causal explanation

- Attribution process is the understanding of factors used in formulating explanation

- The process of making inferences about behaviour

- Attributional style: An individual's predisposition to make certain causal explanations
  - Dispositional (internal), Situational (external)

Dispositional & Situational Attributions

- Internal (dispositional) attribution: internal characteristics such as attitude, mood or personality
- External (situational) attribution: behaviour has been caused by some outside factors
  - Observer implies the actor could not help it, he/she had no control over it
- Planned behaviours = internal attribution
- Involuntary behaviours = internal or external
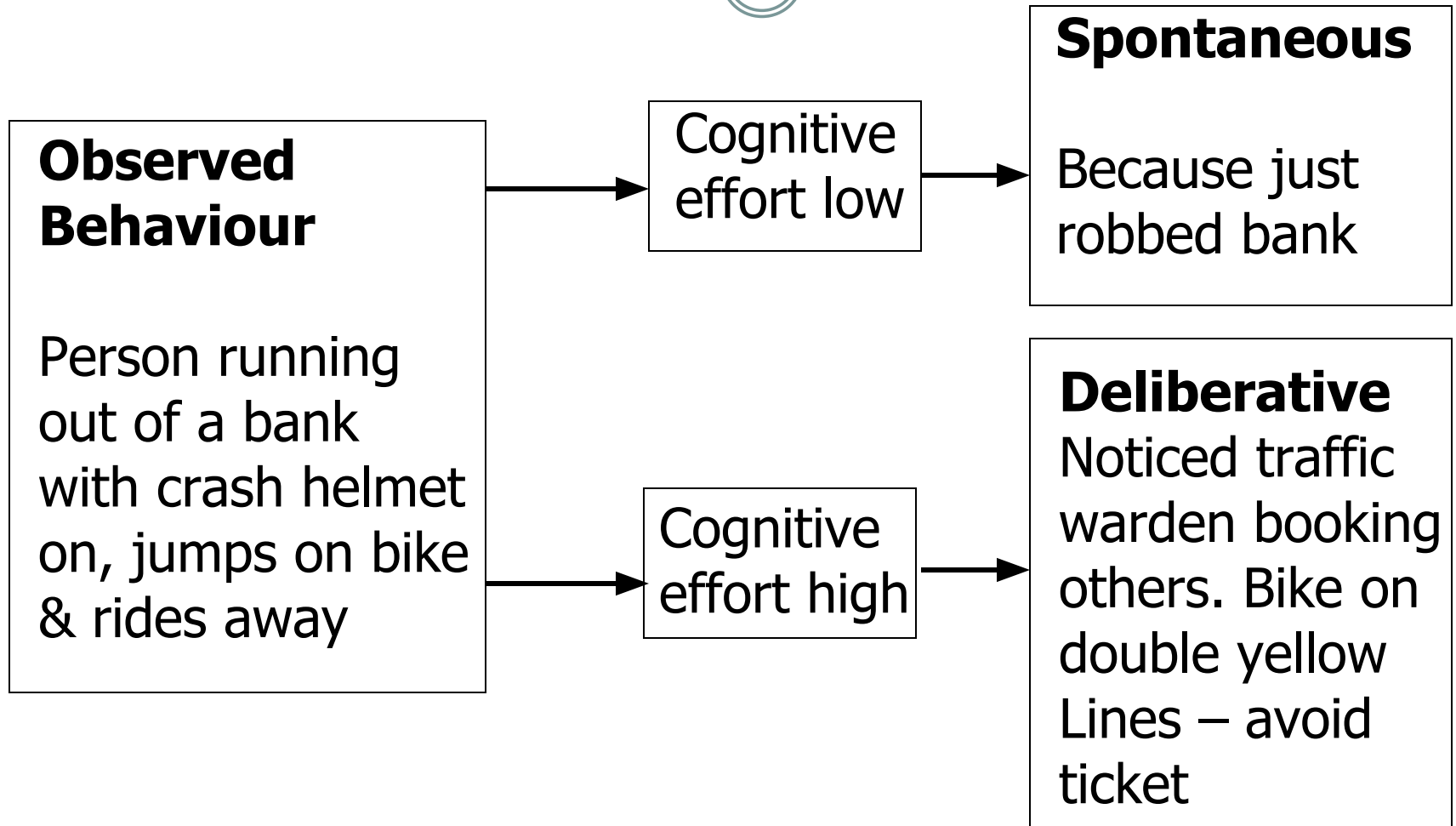- Type of attribution made related to perceived responsibility for actions

Spontaneous & Deliberative Attributions

- Spontaneous: without consciously thinking about alternative possible causes e.g. individuation processes
  - Stereotyping & impression formation
  - Little cognitive effort
- Deliberative: consciously think about behaviour plus social context
  - Cognitive effort high
- Motivation = deliberation (Fisk & Neuberg, 1990)
- Happy mood = spontaneous (Fisk & Taylor, 1991)

Observed Behaviour

Person running out of a bank with crash helmet on, jumps on bike & rides away

→ Cognitive effort low →

Spontaneous

Because just robbed bank

→ Cognitive effort high →

Deliberative
Noticed traffic warden booking others. Bike on double yellow Lines – avoid ticket

Some Early Attribution Theories

- Heider & Simmel (1944) hypothesised that:
  - People perceive behaviour as being caused
  - The causes of behaviour are inside or outside of the person and in some cases both
  - People give causal attributions even to inanimate objects.

- Heider (1958) advised social psychologists to assume people were naïve/lay scientists who used rational processes to explain events
  - Social cognition: assumption of…….

Attribution of inanimate objects
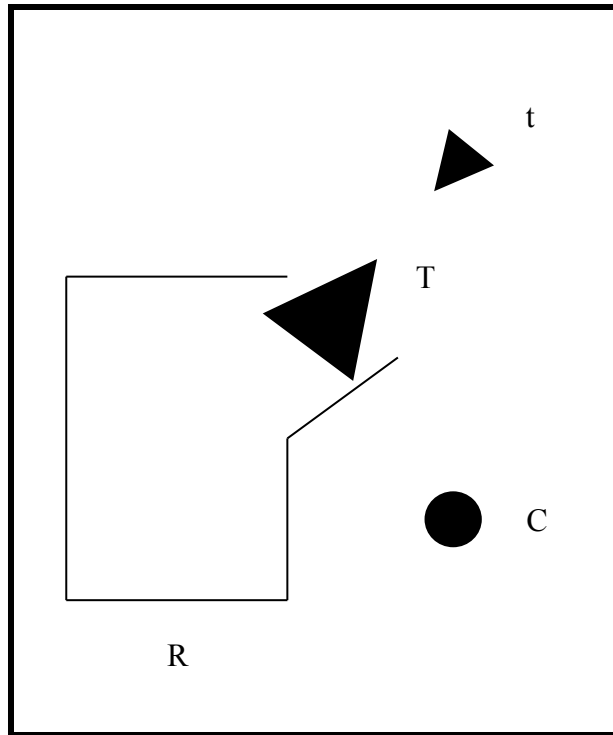
- Short films involving shapes

- "What did you see in the film?"

- Intentions & motives in behaviour of shapes

- Personal characteristics to shapes

Naive scientist (Heider, 1958)

- Use of cause-effect processes to make sense of the environment.

- Search for causes to understand motivation of others.

- Motivated to predict environment.
  - Look for stable, enduring traits.

- Distinguish between personal factors (internal) and environmental factors (external).

- Jones & Davis (1965)
- Use information about another person's behaviour and its 'effects' to draw a **correspondent inference**
- Observe behaviour then make inference that corresponds to whether we think the behaviour is attributable to a dispositional / internal / personality / trait characteristic.
- Things that are enduring and stable within an individual.
- **But HOW do we do this?**

Correspondence Inference Theory

- 'Internal' cognitive questioning
- **Q1: Were the effects of someone's behaviour intended?**
  - We are more likely to draw a correspondent inference if the behaviour appears **intentional** than when it is unintentional.
  - Intention is important: Individual must know the consequences of their action and have the ability to carry out the action.
    - **Key assumption**: Behaviour voluntary and free will
      - No inferences over involuntary behaviour
- **Q2: Were the effects of the behaviour socially desirable?**
  - We are more likely to decide there is a correspondence when the effects of the behaviour are deemed **socially undesirable**.

Correspondence Inference Theory

- Q3: Does the behaviour of the person impact on me?
  - Impact on person making the attribution = dispositional attribution
  - = Hedonic relevance

- <u>Summary</u>

- We seek to infer that an observed act, *and the intention behind it*, correspond to an underlying stable quality or disposition in the person carrying out that behaviour.

- People strive to make correspondent inferences because a dispositional cause is a stable one ☐ predictability ☐ sense of control

CIT: Problems

- Can the attributor categorise behaviour as voluntary?
  - What if we have NO prior knowledge of the person?
- How do we then combine the information re intention, social desirability & hedonic relevance to make the final attribution?
  - *Answer:* We can change the dispositional attribution made (Gilbert et al, 1988)
    - Correspondence inference is a relatively **automatic** process (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) whereas correcting dispositional attributions in the light of situational factors suggests more **deliberative** processing.
- Only about *internal attributions*

A Two-Step Model of Causal Attribution

Gilbert & Malone (1995)

- Observed Behaviour

- Dispositional Attribution

- Situational Attribution / Correction

- Re-defined Dispositional Attribution

Automatic Step Default	Effortful / Deliberative Step:

Co-Variation Model (Kelley, 1967, 1963).

- The naive scientist view.

- People calculate how a number of factors co-vary with observed behaviour and make attribution based on this.

- This *co-variation principle* predicts whether to attribute a behaviour to **internal** or **external** factors.

- <u>Factors for covariation</u>
  - Consistency, Distinctiveness, Consensus.

Kelly's (1967) Co-variation Model

- Accounts for dispositional (internal) and situational (external) attributions

- 3 types of information used to make attributions

- How these co-vary determines type of attribution made

- Each has high and low value

Kelley (1967): ANOVA Theory

- **Distinctiveness**
  - *How does the person act when in similar situations ?*
    - High distinctiveness = behaviour is 'unique' to this situation – the individual never behaves this way in other situations
    - Low distinctiveness = behaviour is 'typical' of these situations – the individual behaves this way in most other situations.
- **Consistency**
  - Does the person or object behave in this way in similar circumstances? Does the person behave similarly across time?
    - High consistency when the individual always behaves this way in this situation – when the behaviour has been seen before
    - Low consistency is when this is a new behaviour – the individual never behaves this way in this situation
- **Consensus**
  - *Do other people behave in the same way (i.e. like this person) in response to the stimulus (i.e. in similar situations)?*
    - High consensus is when other people act like the person in question
    - Low consensus is when people act differently than the person in question

An Example………..

- David attend one of my lectures and tells you that he liked it very much
- Can and how do we attribute this behaviour (i.e. liking) to
  - David
  - The lecture
  - The circumstances

- *<u>Distinctiveness</u>*
  - If David likes all lectures and has same reaction the information is **low** in distinctiveness

  - If David likes my lectures and does not have the same reaction to other lectures distinctiveness is **high**

An Example..........

● *<u>Consensus</u>*
- Does David's reaction to my lecture show consensus?
- If everybody else says the lecture was great, David's reaction = **high** in consensus
- If few people liked the lecture = l**ow** consensus

● *<u>Consistency</u>*
- If we assume that David has seen a number of my lectures, did he like them each time he attended?
- If yes = **High** consistency
- If no = **Low** consistency

Making the Attribution: Example

Attribute to:	David -Internal -Dispositional	Lecture -External -Entity	Circumstances External Specific Situational
Distinctiveness	**LOW**	**HIGH**	**HIGH**
Consensus	**LOW**	**HIGH**	**LOW**
Consistency	**HIGH**	**HIGH**	**LOW**

Accounting for "one-offs"

- The three sources of info not available
- Observe "one-off" behaviours
- Kelly (1972): use **discounting** or **augmenting** principle in these instances
- Discounting = attach less importance to one cause when other causes present
- Augmenting = attach less importance to one cause when behaviour happened in presence of inhibiting factors
- Also use **causal schemas** – causal generalisations

Co-Variation Model: Evaluation

- Not all information types used all of the time
  - Consensus least used information source

- Significant cognitive effort required
  - Too busy to attend to information

- Not all information types always available

- Only unexpected events, or threat-related events, lead people to use the three information sources in the way claimed by Kelley

Weiner's (1986) Attribution Model

- Specific for attributions of **success** or **failure** (*achievement*)
- Attributions made generates *expectations* for the future
- Three separate dimensions to make the attribution
  - *Locus* – internal (person), external (situation)
  - *Stability* – whether locus factor stable over time
  - *Controllability* – whether performance under personal control
- Eight possible combination i.e. 2 x 2 x 2

Dimensions & Combinations

	Internal		**External**	
	Stable	*Unstable*	*Stable*	*Unstable*
Controllable	Usual Effort	Special Effort	Help / no-help from others	Special help / no help from others
Uncontroll-able	Ability	Mood	Task difficulty	Luck / chance

Biases in Attribution

- Individual differences
  - Locus of control (Rotter, 1966)
- Cultural factors – personal vs. social identity
  - Differences in belief and value systems between cultures, resulting in corresponding differences in social explanation (Smith and Bond, 1998).
  - In Western cultures there is a tendency to make dispositional attributions (Ross, 1977), but this is much less so in more collectivist cultures (Shweder and Bourne, 1982).
- Fundamental attribution error
- Actor/observer bias
- False consensus effect

Fundamental Attribution Error

- Ross (1977): the tendency for people to make internal (dispositional) attributions regarding other people's behaviour.
- Applies only when making inferences about another's behaviour, not own behaviour.
- Heider (1958) – attentional factors
  - Default is to focus on the person behaving rather than situational cues
  - Person dominant in the perceiver's thinking
- FAE therefore spontaneous (automatic) rather than deliberative processing
- Gilbert's (1989) two stage model of the FAE

Why does the FAE operate as it does?

- Heider (1958), Taylor & Fisk (1975) – attentional factors
  - Default is to focus on the person behaving rather than situational cues
  - Person dominant in the perceiver's thinking

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- Gilbert's (1989) two stage model of the FAE

Gilbert's (1989) two stage model
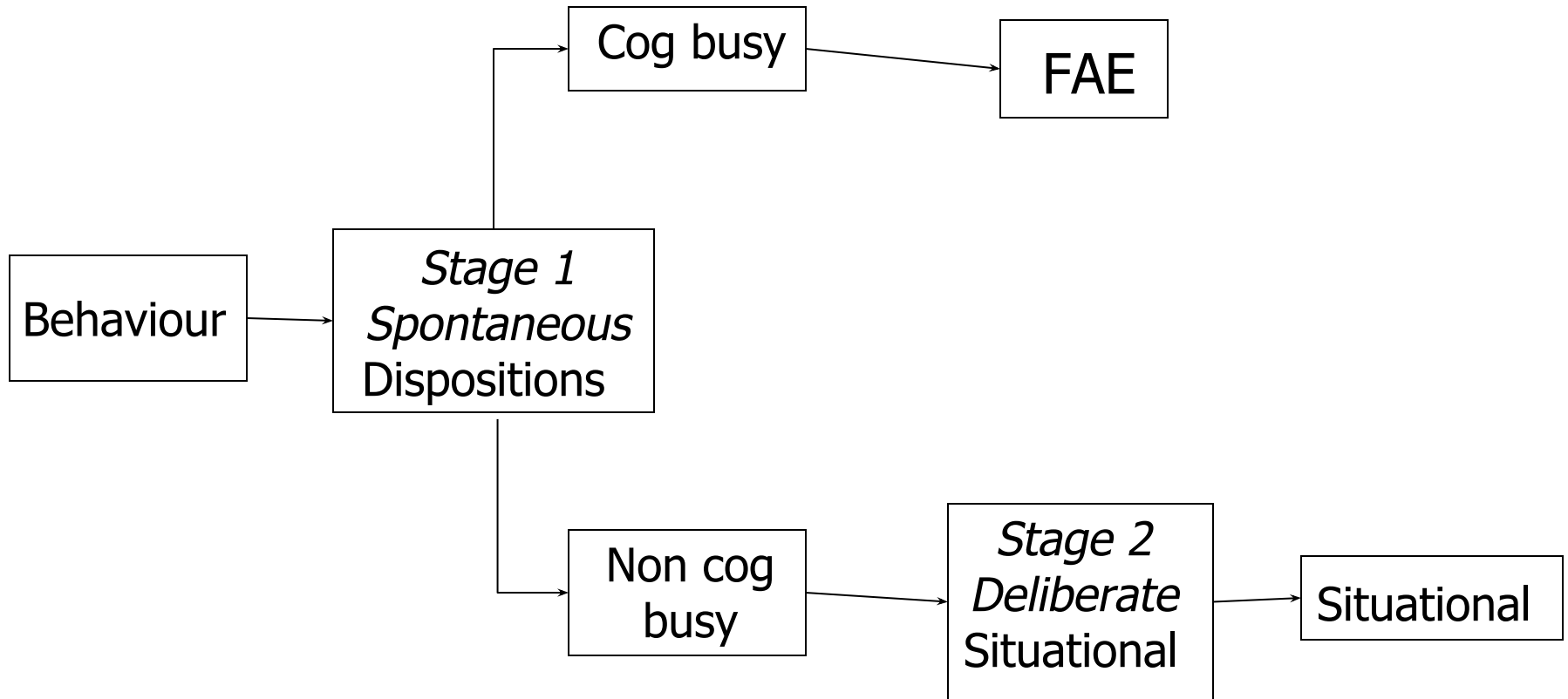
Actor-Observer Differences

- When explaining own behaviour (actor) - emphasis on situational
- When explaining another's (observer) – emphasis on dispositional
- Default is that attention focussed on situation (e.g. other's reactions to us) when analysing own behaviour
  - Greater information available for self-rating
- Can reverse effect by challenging the default
  - Making person consider non-default information i.e. dispositions for actor, situational for observer

Summary

- **What is attribution theory?**
  - Collection of theories that seek to understand how people assign causes to social events.
- **Which theories/models are cognitive accounts of how and why people explain events?**
  - CIT, Co-variation model, success-failure model, 2-stage model
- **What are the main errors and biases in the attributional process?**
  - Fundamental attribution error, actor-observer bias