

Social Cognition and Attribution



Dr Katie Sullivan

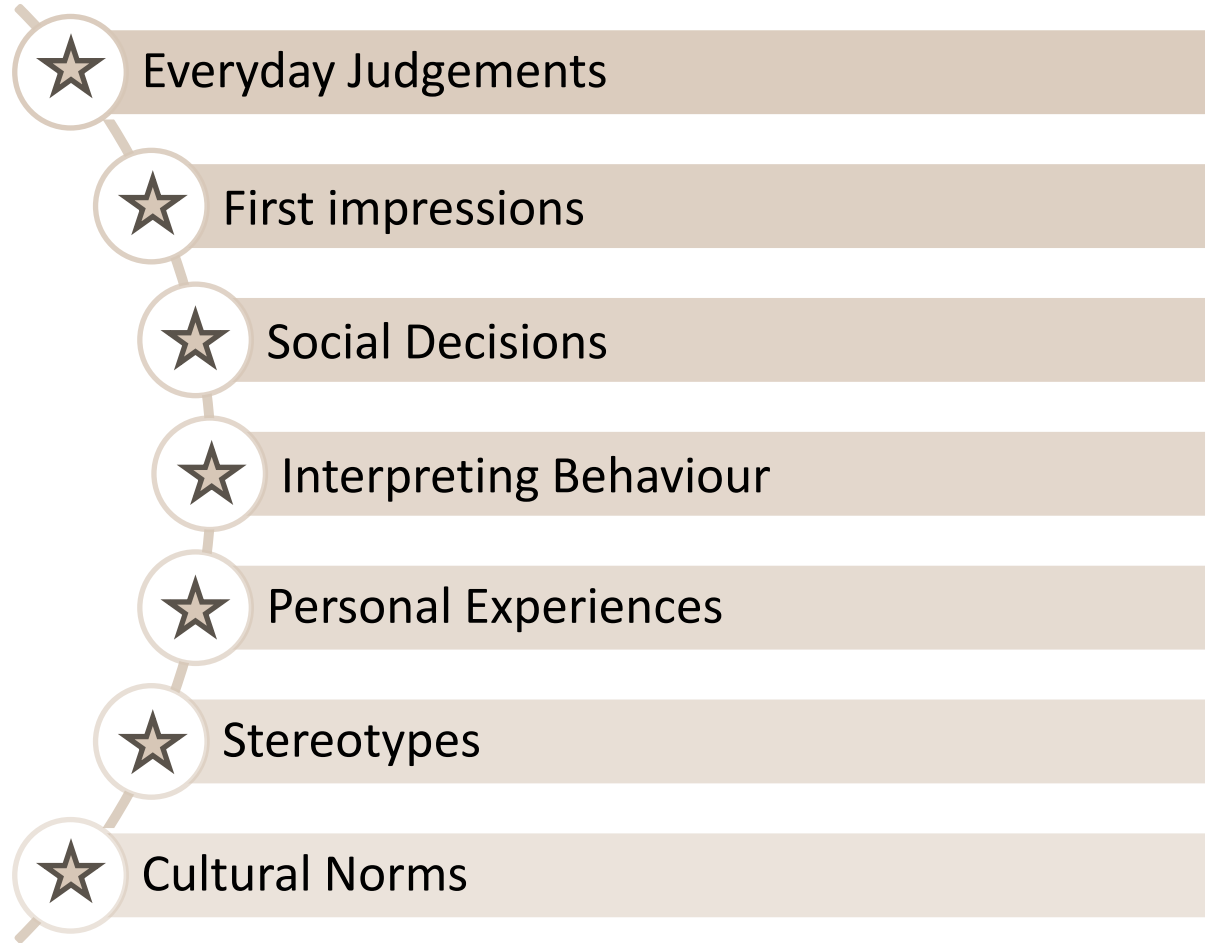
What is Social Cognition?

The scientific study of the way in which thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the real, imagined, or implied presence

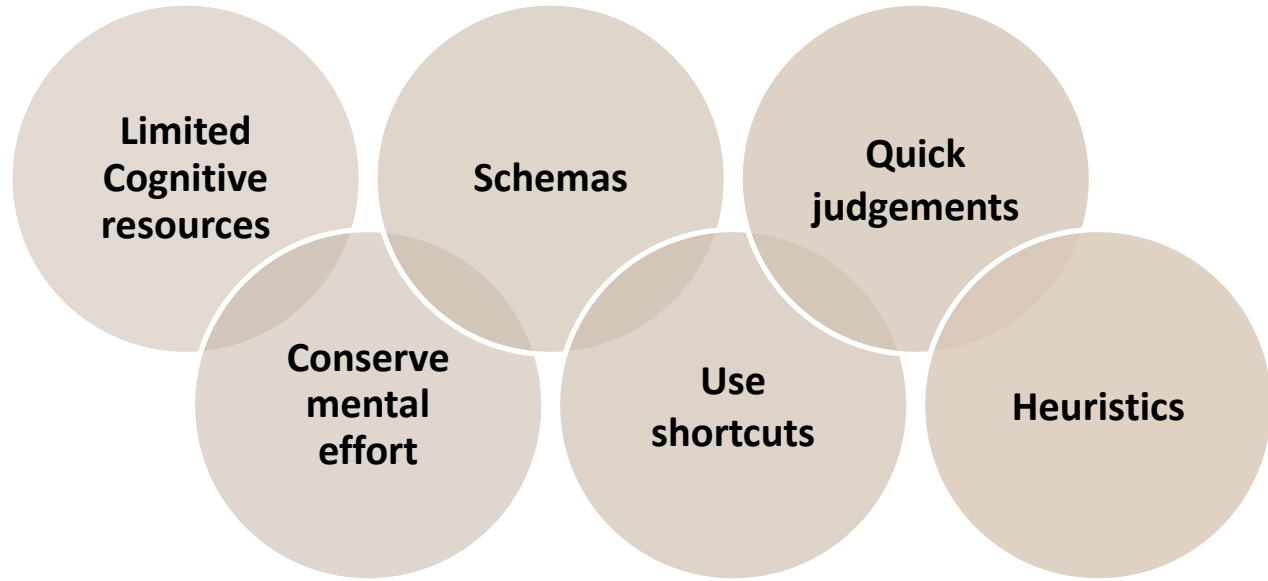
(Allport, 1954)

- How we think about:
 - Others
 - Social situations
- It includes:
 - Attention
 - Memory
 - Judgement
 - Interpretation
 - Decision-making
- Its usefully.... But not always accurate

Why Does Social Cognition Matter?



The 'Cognitive Miser'

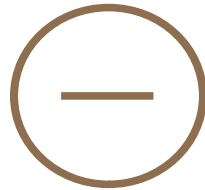


(Fiske & Taylor, 1991; 2021)

The 'Cognitive Miser'



- Make quick decisions
- Navigate social interactions efficiently
- Function in complex environments



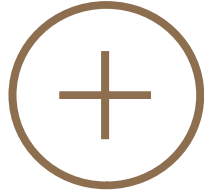
- Overgeneralised
- Influenced by stereotypes
- Based on incomplete information

Schemas

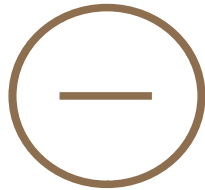
- Mental frameworks for organising information
- Types:
 - Person schemas
 - Role schemas
 - Event schemas
- Social neuroscience research suggests stereotypes and schemas can become automatically activated during person perception.

Amodio (2019)

Schemas



- Process information quickly
- Make predictions about behaviour
- Navigate social situations efficiently



- Ignore information that doesn't fit
- Misinterpret behaviour
- Reinforce stereotypes

Effects of Schemas

Attention

- Influences what we notice/ignore
- directing our attention toward information that is relevant or expected, and away from information that doesn't fit

Interpretation

- we might interpret it differently, even if we observe the same behaviour
- This depends on our existing schemas

Memory

- We are more likely to remember information that is consistent with our schemas, and we may forget/distort information that doesn't fit.
- Schemas can become self-reinforcing
- Brewer & Treyens (1981) demonstrated schema-driven memory distortions.

Culture and Cognition

Role of Culture

- Social cognition does not occur in a cultural vacuum
- Culture influences what people pay attention to, how they interpret behaviour, and even what information they remember

Nisbett, R. E., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001)

- East Asians tend to use a more holistic style of cognition, attending to relationships, context and the broader field
- Westerners tend to use a more analytic style, focusing attention on salient objects and their attributes.

Masuda, T., & Nisbett, R. E. (2001)

- Japanese participants paid significantly more attention to background and contextual information
- American participants focused more on focal objects within a scene.

Confirmation Bias

People seek evidence that confirms expectations.
Snyder & Swann (1978)

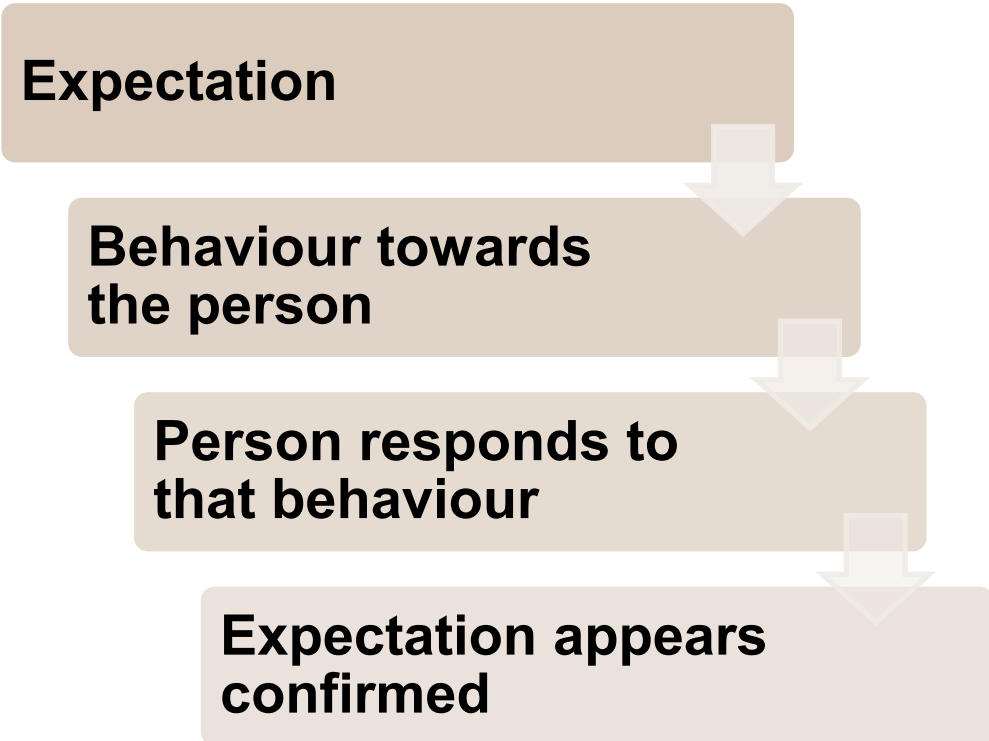
- Examples:
 - First impressions
 - Relationships
 - Political beliefs
 - Stereotypes
- Cultural Consideration
 - Confirmation bias may be shaped by cultural values and social norms.
 - What counts as "expected" behaviour differs across cultures.

Nickerson (1998): Confirmation bias is one of the most pervasive cognitive biases.

Self-fulfilling Prophecies

Expectations can influence outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968)

Expectation



```
graph TD; A[Expectation] --> B[Behaviour towards the person]; B --> C[Person responds to that behaviour]; C --> D[Expectation appears confirmed];
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The diagram illustrates the process of a self-fulfilling prophecy through four sequential steps, each in a light brown rounded rectangle. The steps are connected by downward-pointing arrows, indicating a causal flow from expectation to confirmation.

**Behaviour towards
the person**

**Person responds to
that behaviour**

**Expectation appears
confirmed**

Mini Task: The Snap Judgement Challenge

I'm going to show you several people.

Your task is to make quick judgements about them.

For each person, write down:

- Occupation
- Age
- Personality
- Interests

You only get 10 seconds!







Mini Task: The Snap Judgement Challenge

What information were you using?

How confident were you?

Why were many of us wrong?

Heuristics

(Tversky &
Kahneman,
1974)

**Availability
Heuristic**

**Representativeness
Heuristic**

Anchoring heuristic

Affective heuristic

Heuristics

Availability Heuristic

Judging the likelihood of an event based on how easily examples come to mind.

Representativeness Heuristic

Anchoring heuristic

Affective heuristic

Heuristics

Availability
Heuristic

**Representativeness
Heuristic**

Judging someone based on how closely they match our stereotype of a category.

Anchoring heuristic

Affective heuristic

Heuristics

Availability
Heuristic

Representativeness
Heuristic

Anchoring heuristic

Affective heuristic

People rely heavily on an initial piece of information and adjust insufficiently from it.

Heuristics

Availability
Heuristic

Representativeness
Heuristic

Anchoring heuristic

Affective heuristic

Using emotions and feelings to guide judgement.

Brady et al., (2020) Emotionally charged information spreads faster online than neutral information.

Dual Processing (Kahneman, 2011)

System 1

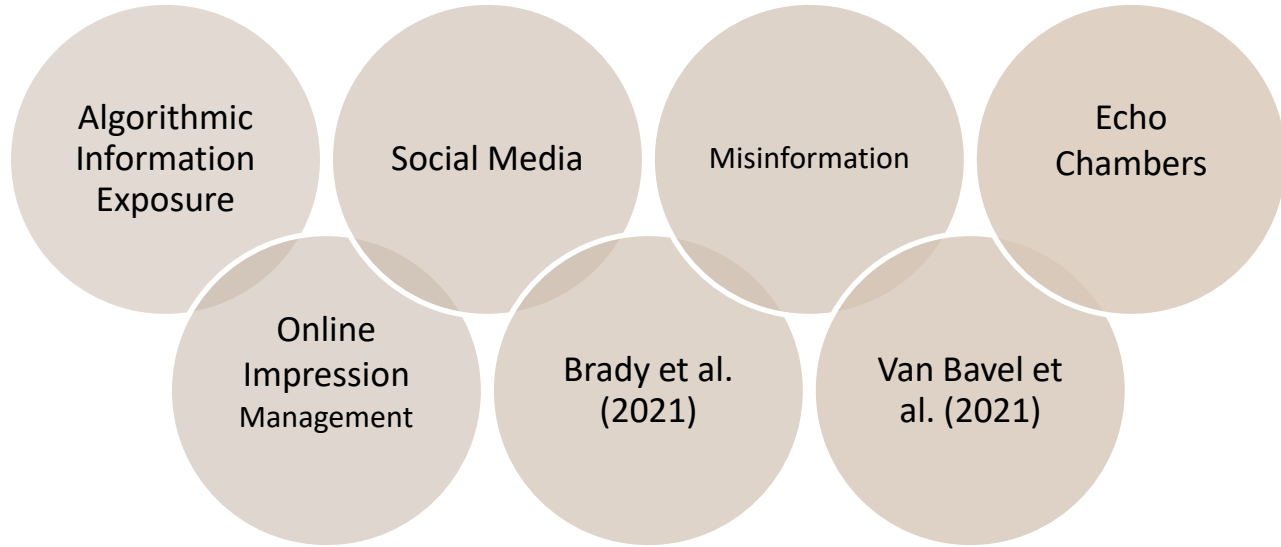
- This is fast, automatic, and effortless.
- It operates almost instantly and often outside of conscious awareness.
- More likely to rely on: Schemas/Heuristics/Assumptions/Stereotypes

System 2

- This is the type of thinking we use when:
 - Carefully analysing a situation
 - Reflecting on a decision
 - Trying to override an initial reaction
- Requires effort, time, and motivation, so we don't always engage it.

- Automatic Social Cognition (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999)
- Evans & Stanovich (2013) Updated dual-process account.
- Sherman et al. (2014) argue that social cognition is best understood as an interaction between automatic and controlled processes

Social Cognition in the Digital Age



Task: Social Situation Interpretation

"The Group Chat Incident"

You send a message to your seminar group.

Everyone sees it.

Nobody replies.

24 hours later, still nothing.

Working in pairs:

- Generate as many explanations as possible in 2 minutes.
- Not explanation is off limits

Task: Social Situation Interpretation

Why did your first explanation come to mind?

Was it the most likely explanation?

Did anyone automatically assume something negative?

What is Attribution?



Explaining behaviour



‘Why did this person act in that way?’



Assigning a cause to behaviour

Attribution Theory

Naïve psychologist (Heider, 1958)

- We are constantly trying to make sense of other people's behaviour in a way that feels logical and predictable.
- We have a need to see the world as:
 - Orderly
 - Predictable
 - Understandable
- We almost automatically start asking:
 - Why did they do that?
 - What caused that behaviour?
 - What does that say about them?

Internal vs External Attribution

Internal /
dispositional

External /
situational

Internal vs External Attribution

Internal /
dispositional

- **Personality traits** (e.g., 'they're lazy')
- **Abilities** (e.g., 'they're talented')
- **Intentions or motivations** (e.g., 'they wanted to help')

External /
situational

Internal vs External Attribution

Internal /
dispositional

External /
situational

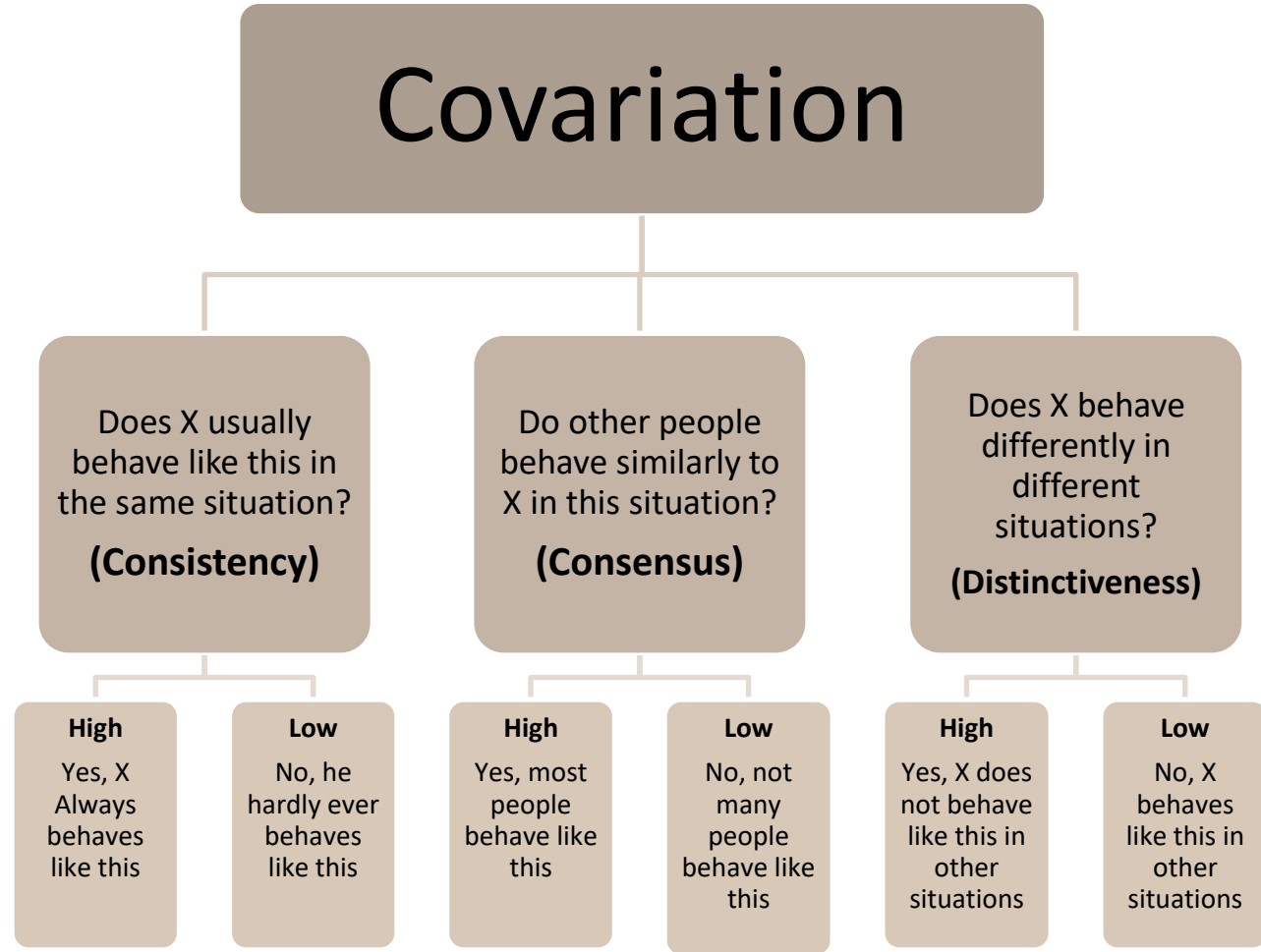
- **The environment** (e.g., noisy classroom, bad weather)
- **Social pressure** (e.g., peer influence)
- **Circumstances** (e.g., lack of time, unexpected events)

Internal vs External Attribution

Internal /
dispositional

External /
situational

Kelley's Covariation Model of Attribution



Internal attribution

- High consistency
- Low distinctiveness
- Low consensus

External attribution

- High consistency
- High distinctiveness
- High consensus

Task: Attribution Detective

Who or What Is Responsible?

For each case:

1. Use Kelley's model and decide if each of the below are High or Low:
 - Consistency
 - Consensus
 - Distinctiveness
2. Decide whether the behaviour is best explained by:
 - Internal causes
 - External causes
3. Be prepared to justify your answer.

Case 1: Sarah fails a statistics exam

- Consistency:
 - Sarah struggles with statistics repeatedly.
- Consensus:
 - Most students passed.
- Distinctiveness:
 - She performs well in other subjects.

Internal or External Attribution?

Case 2: Tom arrives late

- Consistency:
 - Tom is rarely late
- Consensus:
 - Many students arrived late.
- Distinctiveness:
 - His is only late today.

Internal or External Attribution?

Case 3: Group Project Mystery (Lisa)

- Consistency:
 - Lisa rarely contributes in any group.
- Consensus:
 - Everyone else contributes.
- Distinctiveness:
 - She behaves similarly across modules.

Internal or External Attribution?

Attribution Biases

- Systematic errors in judgement
- Our explanations for behaviour are often influenced by systematic biases
- Occur when we:
 - Rely on mental shortcuts
 - Focus on certain types of information
 - Overlook other important factors
- Why?
 - The cognitive miser = we simplify thinking
 - Schemas = expectations influence interpretation
 - Dual processing = we rely on fast, automatic judgements

Correspondence Bias

What is it?

- Tendency to infer stable personality traits from behaviour.
- Even when situational explanations are obvious.

Jones & Harris (1967)

- Participants asked to read essays that were either supportive of or critical of Fidel Castro
- Some essay writers had been assigned their position and had no choice about what they wrote.
- Despite knowing this, participants still tended to assume the writers genuinely held the views expressed in the essays.
- Participants inferred attitudes from behaviour even when the situation clearly limited personal choice.

Fundamental Attribution Error (Ross, 1977)



Overestimate internal causes



Underestimate situational factors



We assume behaviour reflects who someone is, rather than what situation they are in



Example: Blaming personality not context

Why does FAE occur?

Perceptual Salience

- When we observe behaviour, the person is the most visible part of the situation; they are literally the focus of our attention.
- The context is often less obvious or less salient.

Cognitive Efficiency

- Linking back to the cognitive miser, internal explanations are often:
 - Faster
 - Simpler
 - Require less information

Lack of Information

- In many real-world situations, we simply don't have full access to situational information

Cultural Influences

- In individualistic cultures (like the UK or US), there is a strong emphasis on personal responsibility and individual traits. This makes dispositional explanations more common.
- In collectivist cultures, people may be more likely to consider context and social relationships, reducing the strength of the FAE.

FAE Research

The Quiz Game Study (Ross, Amabile & Steinmetz, 1977)

- people favour internal explanations, even when situational factors are clearly influencing performance.

Real-world Attribution (Riggio & Garcia, 2009)

- FAE occurs naturally in everyday life, not just in lab studies

Cultural Replications

- FAE is stronger in individualist cultures, but still present globally

Neuroscience / Cognitive Research

- FAE has a cognitive and neural basis, not just behavioural
- Neuroimaging evidence suggests dispositional judgements occur earlier than situational corrections (Liu et al., 2021)

Why does FAE matter?

- Everyday Social Judgement
 - We may judge others harshly without considering context
 - We may misinterpret behaviour as intentional or personality-based
- Blame and Responsibility
 - Leads to victim-blaming (e.g., blaming individuals for negative outcomes)
 - Underestimates structural or situational causes
- Stereotyping and Prejudice
 - Behaviour is attributed to group characteristics rather than context
 - Reinforces existing biases and assumptions

Actor- Observer Bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1971)



- When we are the actor (explaining our own behaviour), we are more likely to make situational attributions
- When we are the observer (explaining someone else's behaviour), we are more likely to make dispositional attributions

Perceptual Focus

- When we are observing someone else, our attention is naturally focused on them as the person
- But when we are reflecting on our own behaviour, we are more aware of the wider context

Access to Information

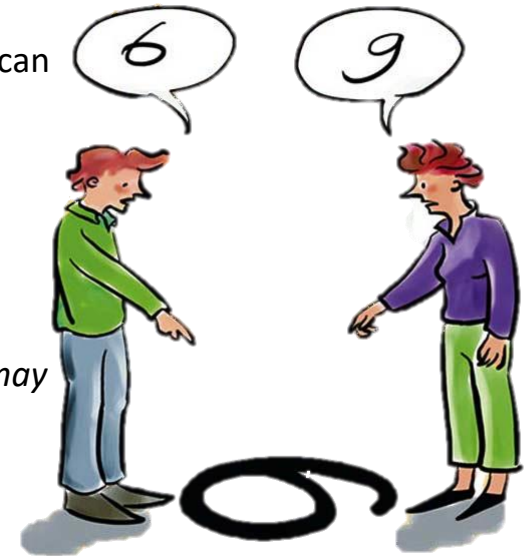
- We have much more information about our own circumstances
- But when judging others, we often lack that contextual information, so we rely more on assumptions about their personality

Actor-Observer Bias

Why is it important?

- **Social misunderstandings:** we may misinterpret others' actions
- **Conflict:** different perspectives lead to different explanations
- **Relationships:** misjudging intentions can affect trust and communication

However, Some modern meta-analytic research suggests actor-observer effects may be weaker and more context-dependent than originally proposed (Malle, 2006)



Self-Serving Bias

Success

Internal

Failure

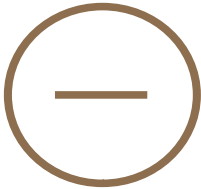
External

- When things go well, we tend to make internal attributions
 - 'I did well because I'm capable, intelligent, or hardworking'
- When things go badly, we tend to make external attributions
 - 'I failed because the situation was unfair, difficult, or outside my control'

Self-Serving Bias



- Helps maintain confidence and motivation
- Protects self-esteem in difficult situations



- Can reduce self-reflection and learning
- May lead to blaming others or external factors
- Can affect relationships if others feel unfairly blamed

Cultural Differences

Individualist/collectivist

- Individualist = internal focus
- Collectivist = contextual focus

Miyamoto & Wilken (2018)

- People from East Asian cultures attend more strongly to contextual information than North Americans.

Nisbett et al. (2001)

- Western cultures = analytic thinking
- East Asian cultures = holistic thinking

Miller (1984)

- US participants = more dispositional explanations
- Indian participants = more situational explanations

Why is Culture important here?

It challenges the assumption

- Not all psychological processes are universal
- What we might consider a 'normal' way of explaining behaviour is actually shaped by cultural values.

Attribution

- Attribution is shaped by:
 - Social norms
 - Belief systems
 - Cultural expectations about responsibility and behaviour

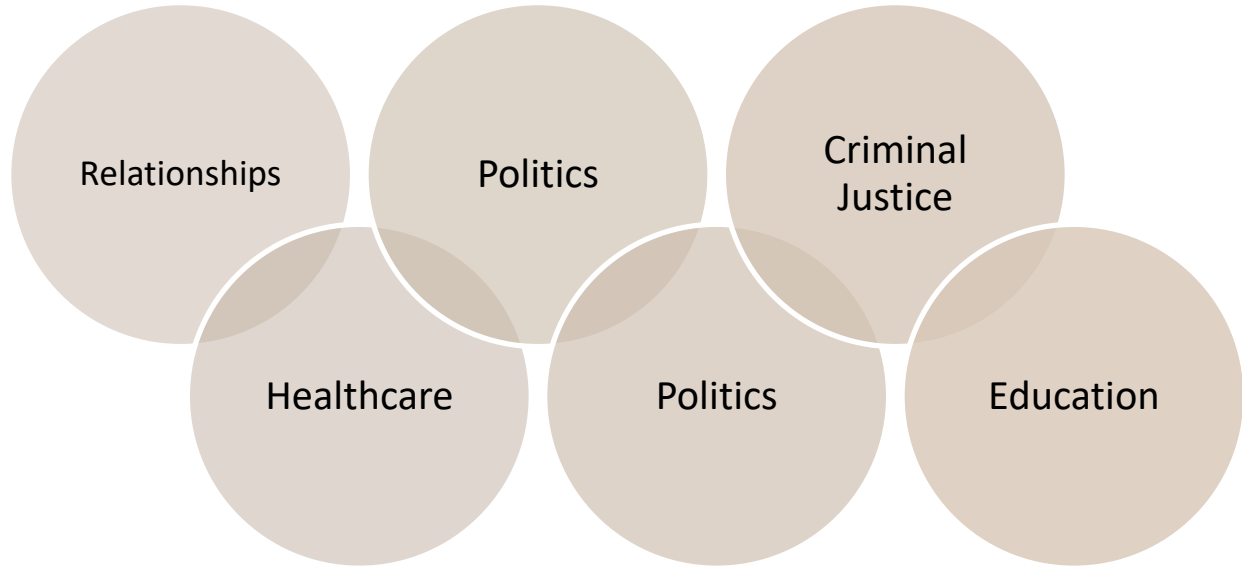
Implications for cross-cultural interaction

- For example:
 - Someone from an individualistic culture may interpret behaviour as personality-driven
 - Someone from a collectivist culture may interpret the same behaviour as context-driven
- This can lead to misunderstandings or differences in judgement

Critical Evaluation of Attribution Research

- Strengths
 - Extensive empirical support
 - High ecological relevance
 - Cross-cultural evidence
- Limitations
 - Many classic studies use Western samples (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan (2010)
 - Attribution processes vary by context
 - Individual differences often neglected
- Open Science Considerations
 - Replication movement
 - Greater methodological transparency

Why do Attribution Errors matter?



Task: Headline Detectives: Who Gets the Blame?

Split into groups of 3-5

Each group will get a headline

Complete the questions for your specific headline

1. Student fails university course despite repeated support.

2. Teenager arrested following antisocial behaviour incident.

3. Rising number of young adults experiencing anxiety.

4. Unemployment rates increase among young people.

5. School attendance continues to decline.

Task: Headline Detectives: Who Gets the Blame?

1. What explanation is the headline encouraging? Is the cause presented as: Internal? External? Both?
2. Who or what is being blamed? (e.g., Individual, Parents, School, Government, Society, Economy)
3. What information is missing? (e.g., Local job availability? Economic conditions? Education access? Social media? Cost of living? Academic pressures?)
4. Is there evidence of the Fundamental Attribution Error? Are people being blamed more than the situation?
5. How could this headline be framed differently?

Key Takeaways

- Social cognition = thinking about others
 - Perceive others
 - Interpret behaviour
 - Form judgements
- Attribution = explaining behaviour:
 - The distinction between internal and external causes
 - Models like Kelley's covariation model which show how attribution can be quite structured
- Biases shape judgement:
 - The Fundamental Attribution Error
 - The Actor–Observer Bias
 - The Self-Serving Bias

Key Takeaways

- Our understanding of other people is not a direct reflection of reality; it is shaped by cognitive processes, cultural influences, and biases.
- This means that our judgements:
 - Can feel accurate and intuitive
 - But are not always reliable
- These processes influence:
 - Everyday interactions
 - Relationships
 - Social judgements
 - Broader issues like stereotyping, prejudice, and inequality
- So understanding social cognition and attribution helps us become more:
 - Critical in how we interpret others
 - Reflective about our own thinking
 - Aware of the limitations in our judgement