Social Cognition
Attribution

The study of how people interpret, analyze, remember, and use information

Aronson's Example

Beth Kisses Scott

We see it and we start wondering:

Why'd she do it?

- Is it something about Beth's personality?
- Something about Scott?
- Something about them together?
- How could we determine by observation if it's something about her, something about Scott, or something about them together?
  - Maybe she kisses everyone.
  - Maybe everyone kisses Scott.
  - Maybe she's the only one who only kisses Scott.

Attribution Theory: The Naïve Scientist Approach

- People follow fairly logical procedures to make judgments about the world
- A behavior can be caused
  - Internally (by a person's personality)
  - Externally (by the situation or another person)
  - Or by a unique combination of both causes.
- Harold Kelly (1967) Covariation Theory, or Attribution Theory

We see a behavior.

- We attribute the behavior either to
  - The person who did it (**a person attribution**)
  - Or the situation they were in (**a situation attribution**)
  - Or possibly a unique **combination** of the two

How We Decide Using Attribution Theory

- **Is the kissing due to Beth's personality, or is it due to being with Scott, or is it both?**
- **When we decide to make a judgment about a person's behavior (a person or situation attribution) we look for three things:**
- **Consistency** – does person always behave in this manner?
- **Consensus** – Do **others** behave in the same way in the **same situation?**
- **Distinctiveness** – Does the person only behave this way in this situation (or with this person), and does nobody else behave that way?

The Naïve Scientist is Biased!

- Much of the research on this approach found that if you provided people with consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness information, they **would** use it.
  - McArthur 1972
    - John laughs at the comedy, so does everyone else, and John hasn't laughed much at other comedies
    - It's a funny comedy
- But people didn't go out of their way to collect that kind of information.
- And we tended to be subject to a wide range of biases.

Biases

- **Fundamental Attribution Error:**
  - People tend to make dispositional (person) attributions for others' behaviors.
- **Actor-Observer Bias**
  - People see other people as the source of the other people's actions, and see situations as the

Motivational Bias 1
Self-Serving Bias

- **Self-serving bias:**
- Tendency to see oneself as the cause of one's successes, attribute failure to external sources.

Motivational Bias 2
Severity Bias

- **Severity bias:**Elaine Walster (1966): Assignment of responsibility for an accident.
- High severity causes defensive attributions – blaming the person for negative event (Burger, 1981).

Schema-Information Processing Approach (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991)

- Basic assumption: life is full of information overload. To deal with this, we become **cognitive misers:** we develop mental structures to filter the information.
- Schema: an organized collection of one's beliefs and feelings about something.
- Schemas are used to interpret information around us.
  - **Self-Schema:** beliefs and feelings about oneself – similar to self-concept.
  - **Person schema:** beliefs about a person, or type of person – similar to stereotype.
  - **Event schema:** beliefs about characteristics of a kind of event – similar to a script.
- Schemas become "activated" and then affect our interpretation of information.

Determinants of Schema Activation 1: **Stimulus Characteristics**

- **Stimulus Characteristics.** Stimulus characteristics of a person or situation may activate a schema.
  - **Vigilance effect:** negative information is noticed more and is more likely to be processed – seeing somebody look angry or be hostile activates schemas more readily than seeing someone look happy or kind

Determinants of Schema Activation 2: **Recency and Frequency of Activation**

- **Recency and Frequency of activation:** the more recently or frequently a schema has been activated, the more likely it is to be used to interpret present information.