Discuss two theories of attribution

Six different traditions form the backbone of 'attribution theory' and all are concerned with the principles that enable causal explanations for behaviour to be made and allow predictions of how people will respond to situations in the future. The various theories have all built upon Heider's (1958) original work on the attribution process, by which judgements are made about internal/external causes.

Jones & Davis (1965), greatly influenced by Heider, believed that the goal of the attribution process is to make a correspondent inference. A correspondent inference is when both the behaviour and the intention that produced it correspond to some underlying, stable feature of the person (a disposition). An inference is 'correspondent' when the disposition attributed to an actor 'corresponds' to the behaviour from which the disposition is inferred. If, however, the behaviour is attributed to compliance with someone else's demand, then a correspondent inference has not been made.

This theory specifies that the precondition for a correspondent inference is the attribution of intentionality. For this to be made, the actor has to be capable of having produced the observed effects and also know the effects the behaviour would produce. After these initial decisions have been made, an analysis of uncommon effects is made. This involves deciding what is distinctive (uncommon) about the consequences (effects) of the choice that is made when more than one course of action is open to a person.

Generally, the fewer the differences between the chosen and unchosen alternatives, the more confidently the disposition can be inferred. Additionally, the distinctive consequence holds greater importance, especially the more negative aspects involved in the chosen alternative.

However, the analysis of uncommon effects can lead to ambiguous conclusions, therefore it is important to use other cues, which include choice: is the behaviour due to free will or situational factors?

Jones & Davis (1961) demonstrated in their study that behaviour that is not socially desirable and that does not conform to social norms is more often than not attributed to the individual's dispositional characteristics. This relates to behaviour that is out of role and is more informative about their underlying dispositions than when people in well-defined roles behave as they are expected to.

Prior expectations based upon past experiences with the same actor will help inform us whether their current behaviour is typical or atypical. If it is the latter, the behaviour is more likely to be dismissed or explained in terms of situational factors.

Despite empirical support for Jones and Davis' theory, it has limitations, some of which have been addressed by Eiser (1983) who argues that intentions are not a precondition for correspondent inferences. Eiser believes that behaviours that are unintended are beyond the scope of Jones and Davis' theory. Conforming behaviour can be just as informative as behaviour which disconfirms expectations, especially when it confirms stereotypes. Gilbert (1995) also challenges the theory by arguing that the studies that support the theory didn't measure causal attributions. Inferring a disposition is not the same as inferring a cause, and each appears to reflect different underlying processes (Hewstone & Fincham, 1996).

Kelley's covariation model (1967) tries to explain how causal attributions are made when some information is known about how the actor usually behaves in a variety of situations and how others usually behave in those situations. The principles of covariation propose that if two events repeatedly occur together, they are more likely to be causally related than if they rarely go together.

If the behaviour to be explained is thought of as an effect, the cause can be one of three kinds: consensus, the extent to which others behave in the same way; distinctiveness, the extent to which the actor behaves in a similar way towards other similar 'stimuli'; and consistency, which refers to how stable the behaviour is over time.

Kelley suggests that attributions are based on how behaviour covaries with each of these three kinds of cause. Kelley believes that a combination of low consensus, low distinctiveness and high consistency leads to a dispositional attribution, whereas any other combination results in a situational attribution.

Although a number of empirical studies have found support for Kelley, such as that of McArther (1972), the theory has its critics. It has been found that not all three types of causal information are used to the same extent in laboratory studies. For example, Major (1980) found that participants show a preference for consistency over the other two, with consensus being the least preferred. Similarly, Nisbett & Borgida (1975) found the effects of consensus information to be weak when they asked university students to explain the behaviour of a participant in a psychology experiment. They went on to argue that people's judgements are less responsive to consensus information than to the more vivid information regarding the behaviour of one, concrete, target person. However, consensus information can have more of an impact if it is made more relevant (Wells *et al.*, 1978).

Extending Wells *et al.*'s suggestion, Hilton & Slugoski (1986) developed an abnormal conditions focus model, which helps to explain why the three types of causal information are not used to the same extent. They argue that Kelley's three types of information are useful to the extent that the behaviour requiring explanation contrasts with the information given. Just because people make attributions as if they are using covariation 'rules' does not mean that they are (Hewstone & Fincham, 1996). It can be argued that Kelley seems to have overestimated people's ability to assess covariation. His theory is more of a normative model, which states how, ideally, people should come to draw inferences about others' behaviour. However, the actual procedures that people use are not as logical, rational and systematic as the model suggests.

Kelley himself recognised that his covariation theory was limited, as in many situations knowledge concerning the three types of causal information may not be known. As a consequence, Kelley developed the configuration model to account for attributions about a single occurrence.

To conclude, these two major theories of attribution have been useful in proposing explanations of why people behave in the way they do, they see people as being logical and systematic in their explanations. In practice, however, attributions are often made quickly, based upon very little information, and show clear tendencies to offer certain types of explanations for particular behaviours (Hewstone & Fincham, 1996). Indeed, it may be that research into the sources of attributional error and bias would provide a more accurate and comprehensive account of how causal attributions are made, rather than Jones and Davis' and Kelley's theories, which oversimplify the process.