

Dead Certainty in the Cotard Delusion

Kelly Roe, University of Waikato: kellyr@waikato.ac.nz

Defining Delusion

- **‘False belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture’**

(American Psychiatric Association, (2000) pp. 821-822)

The Cartesian Model

- If one appreciated that doubting is a form of thinking then it is impossible to doubt one's existence as a thinking thing.
- If they are attempting to express the belief that they do not exist as a thinking thing, then the content of the belief is self-defeating.

The Biological Model

P1) I can feel my heart beating

P2) I can still walk around

P3) I feel bodily urges such as the need to go to the bathroom

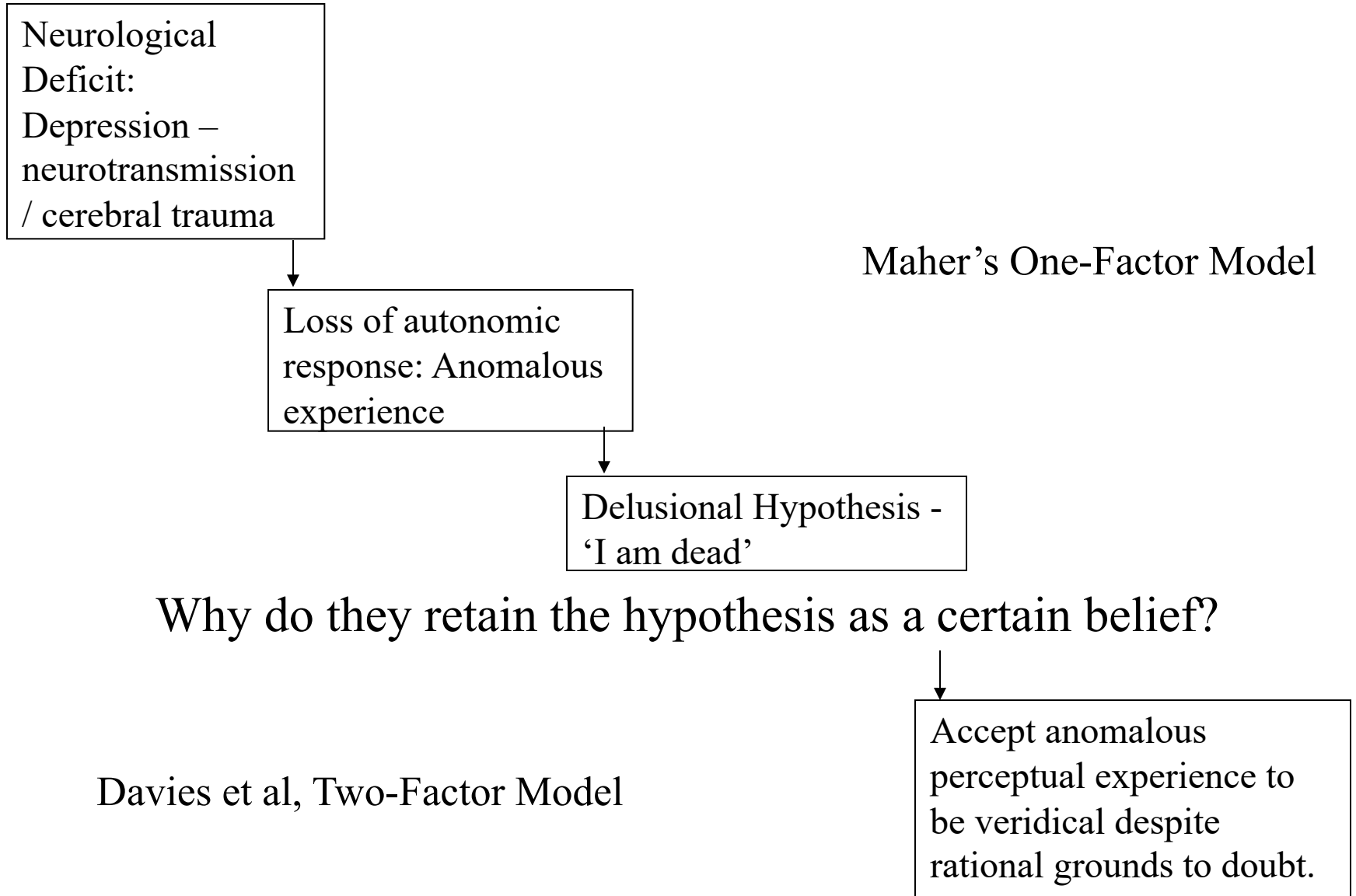
C1) I exhibit biological signs of life

P4) Anything that exhibits biological signs of life cannot be biologically dead

P5) I am (biologically) dead *(the delusional belief)*

C2) I am (biologically) dead and I am not (biologically dead)

From One to Two Factors



From Experience to Belief

- Maher, Davies et al., and the APA definition of delusion are similar with respect to what they construe the delusional subject as doing in making their delusional utterance.
- They concur that in making the claim ‘I am dead’ the subject draws a false conclusion from their experience to what is the case in the world.

Anomalous experience -> belief about reality

Report of experience

- Perhaps they are simply trying to report or express their experience as it seems to them to be where the anomalous experience is the loss of autonomic response.
- This would make sense of why they are certain about what they are saying.
- Facts such as their being able to walk around are indeed irrelevant to their utterance.
- Immune to supporting or falsifying evidence

The Problem of Inaction

- People do not act in ways we would expect were their belief to be a claim about the external world
- People with the Capgras delusion do not:
 - Search for the original
 - Show much concern for their fate
 - Inform the relevant authorities of their disappearance
- Problem for beliefs about reality models
- Well handled by the reports of experience model

The Problem of Action

- If delusions are reports of experience then why did one man decapitate his step-father to look for batteries and micro-film in his head?
- Problem for the report of experience model
- Well handled by belief about external reality models.

Treatment Implications

- **Cognitive therapy:**
 - Assumption that delusional utterances express false beliefs about external reality
 - Challenge belief via counter-example and exposing contradiction
 - Loss of rapport and high drop out rates.
- **An alternative:**
 - Delusional utterances might be reports of experience, or false beliefs about external reality if the appearance / reality distinction is lost
 - Validate the sense of certainty that is appropriately associated with the experience
 - Teach more appropriate alternative ways of expression