Social Cognition

The study of how people process social information

Why cognitive psychology is not enough:
- things do not act
- we perceive, people perceive back
- social cognition implicates the self
- people's traits are unobservable
- people may change and may be different at different times
- people are extremely complex

People Are Not Things

Impression Formation

How do we make initial judgments of others?
What sorts of information do we use?

Note: We often form impressions rather quickly, sometimes without any direct evidence.

Impression Formation

What are the "raw materials?"
- some questions we might consider when we meet someone:
  - How old is it?
  - Gender?
  - Role?
  - Marital status?
  - What is its favorite leisure time activity?
  - Is it intelligent?
  - Extraverted?
  - Friendly?
  - Dishonest?
- Some of this can come from observation... some has to be inferred

Impression Formation

Physical Cues

- physical attractiveness
  - one of the most powerful influences on our initial impressions of others
  - "Physical beauty is the sign of an interior beauty, a spiritual and moral beauty."
    - Johann Schiller
    - "what-is-beautiful-is-good" stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972)
  - physically attractive defendants charged with misdemeanor offenses get lower bail settings than do less attractive defendants
  - professional men 6’2” and over get starting salaries 10% higher than shorter men

Impression Formation

Physical Cues

- observations
  - We move very quickly from observable information (appearance & behavior) to personality trait inferences
    - trait inferences occur automatically
    - traits are more economical to remember
    - we use implicit personality theories to infer traits from other traits
  - behavior
    - Have I been friendly so far?
    - Do I seem to be extraverted?

Impression Formation

Physical Cues

- physical attractiveness
  - rate the ability of alleged VPs based on photos
    - 2 (attractiveness) X 2 (gender)
    - ratings of ability
    - more attractive man = higher in ability
    - less attractive woman = higher in ability
  - Why?
    - women more likely to get ahead based on appearance, less likely to occur that way for men

(Heilman & Swope, 1985)
Impression Formation
Implicit Personality Theories

• what characteristics “go together”
  – If you said friendly, did you not say dishonest?
• once we make assumptions based on one trait (e.g., friendly), we use our IPT to draw conclusions about other traits (e.g., honest)
• some traits more central, thus more descriptive
  – e.g., hostile vs. tidy
• central traits more powerful when forming impressions
  – e.g., Kelley’s warm/cold variables (1950)

Overall Evaluations

• we rely on different types of information
  – e.g., physical appearance, verbal and nonverbal behavior, implicit personality theories
• how do we organize the information into an overall evaluation of the person?
• two schools of thought
  – cognitive algebra (bottom-up process)
    • evaluate first, then integrate
    • based on weights assigned to individual traits
      – e.g., practical (.25) + mean (.75)
  – holistic impressions (Gestalt) (top-down process)
    • integrate first, then evaluate the person
    – e.g., implicit personality theories

Problems with Impression Formation

• reliance on schemas and heuristics can be problematic
• over-reliance on first impressions
• actor/observer differences
  – focus on dispositional, not situational, cues
• expectancies can influence behaviors
  – e.g., Word, Zanna, & Cooper (1974)

Problems with Impression Formation

• expectancies can influence behaviors
  – white male participants: interviews with another white male or an African-American male
  – told they were to select a teammate for a subsequent, competitive task
  – when interviewing an African-American:
    • sat further away
    • shorter interviews
    • more speech errors
    • fewer “immediacy behaviors”
  – second experiment:
    • confederate interviewer
    • interviewees: white male participants
    • immediacy behaviors: few or many
  – when treated with fewer immediacy behaviors (i.e., like the African-Americans), they were rated:
    • less competent
    • less composed
    • liked less
    • also, they liked the interviewer less
### Problems with Impression Formation

- Expectancies can influence behaviors
  - There are real, and potentially harmful, social effects of our impressions of others.
  - Our expectations can influence our verbal and nonverbal behaviors in ways that may elicit the very characteristics we expected.

*(Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974)*

### Automatic thinking

#### Schemas

- One of the primary tools of fast automatic judgment
- Mental structures people use to organize their knowledge about the social world around themes or subjects
- A pattern imposed on complex reality or experience to assist in explaining it, to mediate perception, or to guide response
- Contain our basic knowledge or impressions
- Allow us to interact effectively with the world
- Vary in content: object schema, scripts, person schema

### Automatic thinking

#### Object schema

- Mental model or representation of object characteristics and functions/goals attached to it

#### Event schemas

- Scripts
  - Contain generic information that people have about common, frequently occurring events
  - Allow us to anticipate what is going to happen
  - Allow us to fill in missing details
  - E.g., “going to a restaurant”

#### Person schemas

- Organized set of general knowledge and beliefs about other people’s traits and characteristics
- Self-schema: general knowledge that we believe to be true about our own personality traits, abilities, goals etc.
- Help us go beyond the information given

### Automatic thinking

#### Person schemas

- Organized set of general knowledge and beliefs about other people’s traits and characteristics
- Self-schema
- Help us go beyond the information given
  - We organize by categorizing or grouping stimuli
  - We pay attention to salient features
  - We form impressions quickly and on the basis of little info
  - We use our cognitive structure to make sense of people’s behavior
  - Our needs and goals influence how we perceive others
Automatic thinking

How do schemas affect cognition?

- Selection
  - of most relevant information
- Abstraction
  - information stored in terms of its meaning
- Interpretation
  - using relevant information from LTM
- Integration
  - the process of forming & storing a single integrated memory representation

...distortions are possible....

Social categorization & stereotypes

Advantage: suggest a course of action & interaction
cognitive economy

Stereotypes as energy-saving devices

Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nigel</th>
<th>Julian</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Skinhead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Rebellious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Temperamental</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
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<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Unconventional</td>
<td>Dishonest</td>
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<td>Individualistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>Curious</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen (1994)

Social categorization & stereotypes

Advantage: suggest a course of action & interaction
cognitive economy

Disadvantage: can be wrong
Overgeneralization/outgroup homogeneity: identical characteristics attributed to everyone in a group, regardless of actual variation

Actual--> Perceived-->
Social categorization & stereotypes

**Advantage**: suggest a course of action & interaction
cognitive economy

**Disadvantage**: can be wrong
Overgeneralization/outgroup homogeneity
Salient characteristics rule
Rigidity: not modified in the face of (new) disconfirming
evidence (exceptions allowed -> subtypes)

Mr. X: The trouble with Jews is that they only take care of their
own group.

Mr. Y: But the record of the Community Chest campaign shows
that they gave more generously, in proportion to their numbers, to
the general charities of the community, than did non-Jews.

Mr. X: That shows that they are always trying to buy favor and
intrude into Christian affairs. They think of nothing but money;
that is why there are so many Jewish bankers.

Mr. Y: But a recent study shows that the percentage of Jews in the
banking business is negligible, far smaller than the percentage of
non-Jews.

Mr. X: That's just it; they don't go in for respectable business; they
are only in the movie business or run night clubs.

In Allport, G. (1954), *The Nature of Prejudice*
Attribution

- attribution theory: a group of theories that describe how people explain the more stable causes of behavior
  - Why do people behave the way that they do?
  - What are they likely to do in the future?
  - We are especially likely to make attributions when events are negative or unexpected.

- types of attributions (Heider, 1958)
  - personal attributions -- internal-- refer to traits, attitudes, enduring internal states
  - situational attributions -- external -- refer to aspects of the external environment, including other people
  - these 2 basic kinds of attributions lie on a continuum

Two Theories of Attribution

Correspondent Inference Theory

- we rely on observable behaviors to make inferences about the corresponding underlying traits that produced them
- But not all behaviors are informative. We focus on diagnostic behaviors
  - Normal or expected behavior tells us less about the person than does unusual behavior
  - we are best able to make inferences about a person's underlying disposition (e.g., trait, attitude, intent) when actions are freely chosen and unexpected, and produce unique expected effects

Two Theories of Attribution

Kelley’s covariation model

- Exit point: people are motivated to explain their own and other peoples’ behaviour by attributing causes of that behaviour to a situation or a disposition
- start with a behavior:
  - your friend recommends a movie
  - figure out the reason for the behavior
  - Is it something about the movie?
  - Is it something about your friend?
  - Is it something unpredictable?

Two Theories of Attribution

Kelley’s covariation model

- three types of information:
  - CONSENSUS: Same stimulus: Different people.
  - CONSISTENCY: Same person: Same stimulus.
  - DISTINCTIVENESS: Same person: Different stimulus.
- So we gather information…
Two Theories of Attribution
Kelley’s covariation model

- We integrate the information to find out:
  - Is it something about the movie (i.e., external)?
    - high consensus: other people recommend
    - high consistency: recommendation holds over time
    - high distinctiveness: doesn’t recommend all movies
  - Or is it something about your friend (i.e., internal)?
    - low consensus: only your friend recommends it
    - high consistency: recommendation holds over time
    - low distinctiveness: recommends all movies
  - What if consistency is low?
    - attribution that something unusual is going on

Problems with Attributions

The Fundamental Attribution Error (“FAE”)
- People tend to overestimate the extent to which others’ actions are due to underlying dispositions/trait and underestimate the “power of the situation”

The Ultimate Attribution Error
- People tend to overestimate the extent to which others’ actions are due to underlying group characteristics

Actor-observer difference
- the tendency to see dispositions as relatively more important in accounting for others’ behavior than one’s own, and aspects of the situation as relatively more important in accounting for one’s own behavior

Problems with Attribution

The Fundamental Attribution Error

why does it occur?
- Perceptual salience—the tendency for other people to “engulf the field” (Heider) and demand more attention than situational cues
- To investigate this possibility, Taylor and Fiske (1975) manipulated the perceptual salience of two actors who were observed engaging in a conversation.

Problems with Attribution

The Fundamental Attribution Error

More salient actors were judged to have had a stronger causal role.
Problems with Attribution

The Fundamental Attribution Error
grows stronger with age… but depends on culture too . . . The FAE is more common in Western cultures that tend to emphasize individuality and independence in action.

Problems with Attribution

The Actor/Observer Effect

Why does it occur?
• Perceptual salience: Actors notice the situations around them that influence them to act, while observers notice the actors
• Information access: Actors have more information about themselves than do observers (e.g., how consistent present behavior is to past behavior)
  Actor: “That’s the first time I’ve ever been late to class”
• Motivational bias: Explanations for one’s successes that credit internal, dispositional factors, as opposed to failures, which are explained by external, situational factors (e.g., bad luck)
  [Self-esteem maintenance; self-presentation reasons]

Accuracy of judgments

• Our judgments are both accurate and inaccurate.
  – We tend to be accurate about external visible attributes and observable traits and others’ emotional states
  – Facial expressions of emotions may be part of our evolutionary heritage
  – We are less accurate about inferred internal states (traits/feelings)/
  – People are more accurate if the target’s behavior is not overly variable.
  – People are more accurate if they are outcome dependent on the target.
• Why are people’s personalities difficult to judge accurately?
  – Lack of objective criteria
  – People have idiosyncratic criteria for judging others
  – They use more about likability than about traits
  – Personality traits tend to predict behavior in only a limited set of circumstances

Conclusion

• we rely on different types of information when forming impressions of others
• attributions help us to understand and explain why people do what they do
• attributions can also be flawed
  – egocentric
  – cultural influences