

Social Cognition



Making sense of the world



We fool ourselves into “knowing” things that are not true—why?

- Selective attention
- Selective memory
- Our idea might be so comforting that we want it to be true.
- We then focus our attention on only those instances that confirm the idea.

Kelley’s Attribution Theory (1967)

- When explaining other people's behavior we look for three pieces of information:
 - 1. Consistency—is the behavior the same in other situations and at other times?
 - 2. Consensus—do other people do the same in a similar situation?
 - 3. Distinctiveness—is this person the only one to behave in this manner?

Although we have the capacity to think so rationally, to do so requires:

- Access to accurate, useful information.
- The mental resources needed to process the data.

- Real life rarely gives us both!

Although we have the capacity to think so rationally, to do so requires:

- We often don't have all the information or the information we have is biased.
- We rarely have sufficient time or motivation to really analyze every problem.
- We make *felicific calculations*—decisions to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.



We behave like cognitive misers

- Try to conserve cognitive energy.
- Simplify complex problems.
- Ignore some information to reduce cognitive load.
- Overuse other information to keep from having to search for more.
- Accept a good-enough, less-than-perfect alternative.
- Can lead to errors, biases, and prejudices.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Reference Points & Contrast Effects

- An object can appear better or worse than it is depending on what it is compared to.
- Pratkanis et. al (1989).
- When any object is contrasted with something similar, but not as good, that particular object is judged to be better than would normally be the case.
- Real estate agent showing you a “fixer-upper,” the “old clunker” on the used car lot, the shorter running mate in an election.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Reference Points & Contrast Effects

- Contrast effects impact our self-judgments too.
- High school valedictorian who feels low self-esteem when he enrolls in an elite college.
- People rate themselves as less attractive after being shown images of beautiful people.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- How we interpret social events usually depends on:
- What we are currently thinking
- What beliefs we typically use to make sense of things
- The categories we use to interpret the world (do we see through rose-colored glasses or perceive the world as hostile)
- What is prominent in the situation

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- What is prominent can be induced through priming.
- Ideas that have been recently used or frequently activated are more likely to come to mind and will therefore be used to interpret social events.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- Higgins, Rholes & Jones (1977).
- Primed subjects by having them read lists of either positive or negative trait words.
- Then read paragraph about a character that was open to interpretation.
- Subjects then described the character in their own words and rated him on desirability.
- How the subjects were primed influenced their impressions.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- Bargh, Chen & Burrows (1996).
- Strong effects of exposure to words on behavior.
- Subjects worked anagrams, some related to rudeness and some related to neutral words.
- Those exposed to the rude words were far more likely to interrupt a conversation.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- At least temporarily, we can become whomever or whatever pops into our mind.
- Subjects primed with stereotypical words that describe old people walked more slowly after the priming—just like old people!

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- The media is a major source of “priming” making certain issues and topics more accessible and thereby influencing the public’s political and social agenda.
- Iyengar, Peters & Kinder (1991). Edited the nightly news for one group of participants so that a specific problem facing the US received nightly coverage.
- After one week, subjects were convinced that the primed target problem was more important than they did before entering the experiment, and behaved in a manner consistent with their new perceptions.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Priming and Construct Accessibility

- The media may not be successful in telling people *what to think*, but it is very successful in telling people *what to think about!*



The Effects of Social Context on Social

Judgment: Framing the Decision

- Decision framing—whether a problem or decision is presented in such a way that it appears to represent a potential of loss or a potential for gain.
- Kahneman & Tversky (1984). Presented subjects with two functionally identical options to address a hypothetical epidemic.
- If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.
- If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved.
- 72 % selected A.

The Effects of Social Context on Social

Judgment: Framing the Decision

- If Program A is adopted, 400 people will die.
- If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 will die.
- 78 % selected B.

- People dislike losses and seek to avoid them.

The Effects of Social Context on Social

Judgment: Framing the Decision

- Gonzales, Aronson & Costanzo (1988).
- 2 different sales pitches to insulate home.
- One focused on money saved if your insulate, one focused on money lost if you don't insulate.
- Those in the "loss" condition were twice as likely to invest the money to insulate their homes as those in the "save" condition.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Framing the Decision

- Meyerowitz & Chaiken (1987).
- Pamphlets to increase self-breast examination.
- One pamphlet was informational.
- One focused on the positive consequences of self-examination.
- One focused on the negative consequences of not doing self-examination
- Those who received the pamphlet stressing the negative consequences were more likely to perform the self-examination.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Ordering of Information

Primacy Effect & Impression Formation

- Asch (1946). Two sentences containing the exact same descriptors, one put the positive adjectives first, the other put the positive adjectives last.
- Subjects then rated the person described.
- Rated more positively when the positives were first.
- Repeated with same findings.
- Keep in mind when describing clients / students in reports (e.g. psychological reports)

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Ordering of Information

- Jones et. al (1968). Subjects observed someone taking a 30 question intelligence test. In each case the individual got 15 correct.
- One condition, got 15 right early on and then made errors.
- Second condition, 15 right came toward the end.
- Subjects rated the person who started out well as more intelligent.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Ordering of Information

- Aronson & Jones (1992). Same scenario, except subjects took role of teachers. One group was instructed to raise their learner's performance (score), the other was instructed to raise their learner's ability.
- When the subjects were instructed to raise performance, they rated the students with the good early performance as more intelligent consistent with the primacy effect.
- When instructed to raise ability, rated as more intelligent the students who started poorly but finished well.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Ordering of Information

- Attention decrement explanation—later items in a list receive less attention as the mind starts to wander, and therefore these items have less impact.
- Interpretive set explanation—we form an initial impression that we then use to interpret the rest of the list, either by discounting things that are incongruent with our initial impression, or by subtly changing the meaning of the words in the list.
- In the real world, we rarely have control of the order information comes at us.

The Effects of Social Context on Social Judgment: Amount of Information

- Dilution effect—the tendency for neutral and irrelevant information to weaken a judgment or impression.
- Zukier (1982). Offered descriptions of two students, each reported to study 31 hours/week outside of class. One description said just this. The other added irrelevant information.
- Despite both studying the same amount, subjects rated the second as less intelligent.

The Effects of Social Context on Social

Judgment: Amount of Information

- For a disliked politician, irrelevant personal information in a campaign can reduce the impact of his negative image.
- Irrelevant information about a person makes that person seem more similar to others and more average.

Judgmental Heuristics

- Mental short-cut.
- Simple, approximate rule or strategy for solving a problem that requires very little thought.

**Judgmental Heuristics:
The Representative Heuristic**

- Focus on the similarity of one object to another and infer that the first object acts like the second one.
- High-quality things are expensive, so we infer that if something is expensive, it must be really good.
- Often used to form impressions and make judgments about other people.
- We have simple rules associated with gender, ethnicity, social status, physical attractiveness, that we use to guide thought and behavior.

Judgmental Heuristics:

The Availability Heuristic

- Judgments based on how easy it is for us to call to mind specific examples.
- When asked if they think more people die from shark attacks or falling airplane parts...from fires or from drowning, people say sharks and fires, which are not correct answers, but they tend to receive more media coverage making it easier to call examples to mind.
- If you ask people to estimate the amount of violent crimes, you get different answers based on how much TV they watch.

Judgmental Heuristics:

The Attitude Heuristic

- Attitude=a belief with both emotional and evaluative components.
- A stored judgment about something.
- Halo effect—a bias in which a favorable or unfavorable general impression of a person affects our inferences and future expectations about that person.
- False-consensus effect—tendency to overestimate the number of people who agree with us on any issue; we assume others like what we like and do what we prefer to do.

When Do We Use Heuristics?

- When we don't have time to think carefully about an issue.
- When we are so overloaded with information that it becomes impossible to process the information fully.
- When the issues at stake are not very important.
- When we have little solid knowledge or information to use in making a decision.

Stereotypic Knowledge and Expectations

- Categorization of ambiguous information helps us make decisions and make sense of information.
- It can also invoke stereotypes that then guide our expectations.
- Darley & Gross (1983). Hypothesis confirming bias.
- Subjects saw videotapes of "Hannah," a fourth grade student.
- One video showed her playing in a high-class neighborhood.
- One showed her playing in a run-down neighborhood.

Stereotypic Knowledge and Expectations

- Other subjects saw one of the two videos of her playing, but also showed her completing 25 achievement test problems. Her performance was ambiguous—sometimes missing easy problems and sometimes answering tough questions.
- When subjects saw just the tapes of Hannah playing, they rated her ability as average. They did not apply their stereotypes about rich kids/poor kids.
- When the subjects also saw the video of her solving problems, stereotypic knowledge had an influence

Stereotypic Knowledge and Expectations

- When it was perceived that Hannah came from a low SES background, subjects rated her as having less ability,
- They rated the test as easier,
- And the predicted that she got fewer test items correct.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

- Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968). Pygmalion effect.
- Planted false stereotypes in the minds of teachers that their students were “bloomers,” on the verge of making significant intellectual gains (based on a bogus IQ test).
- At the end of the school year, those students stereotyped as “bloomers” did indeed get smarter.
- We act on our impressions of others (even if those impressions are wrong).

Illusory Correlation

- We perceive a relationship between two entities that we think should be related, but they're not.
- A way to confirm our stereotypes.
- In clinical judgments, when you categorize someone into a diagnostic category, there is a tendency to perceive a relationship between the person and behavior consistent with the diagnosis.

In-Group/Out-Group Effects

- We categorize people into two groups.
- We tend to see members of the out-group as more similar than we see members of our own group (the in-group).
- When you think of members of your own group, you think of the unique individuals, but when you think of members of the out-group, you think of them in terms of the group label.
- In group favoritism—see one's own group as better.

In-Group/Out-Group Effects

- Minimum group paradigm (Tajfel, 1981).
- Complete strangers assigned to a group based on inconsequential criteria, even randomly, yet they rate others who share the group label as better than those who are in the out-group.

Re-constructive Memory

- We re-create our memories from bits and pieces of actual information filtered through and modified by our notions of what we think might have been, should have been, and we would like it to have been.
- Hennis trial (1986), erroneously convicted of triple murder due to errors in re-constructive memory of eyewitnesses.
- Loftus (1974, 1977). Suggestive questioning can influence memory and subsequent eyewitness testimony.

Re-constructive Memory

- "How fast were the cars going when they smashed/hit each other?"
- When "smashed" was used, subjects estimated that the car was traveling much faster as well as stating that there was likely broken glass at the scene.
- We reconstruct, revise and distort our own autobiographical memories too based on self-schemas—coherent memories, feelings, and beliefs about ourselves.

Re-constructive Memory

- Ross, McFarland & Fletcher (1981). Subjects received a persuasive message arguing for the importance of frequent tooth brushing.
- Afterward, those who received the message recalled brushing their teeth more in the past week.
- Loftus (1993). Inserted false memories by instructing family member to talk about these events as fact.
- Afterward, those hearing the false memory added details to it.
- Recovered memory phenomenon

Biases

- Confirmation bias—most people form an initial impression and then seek to confirm that impression.
- Show subjects a blurred photo and ask them to identify it.
- They are less accurate when the photo is gradually brought into focus, even though they have more time to identify it.
- Reason, they form an initial wrong impression and then can't let it go and it interferes with interpreting the photo.

Biases

- Categorizing people and events helps us conserve our cognitive resources, but it can cause us to distort events and miss important information leading to racism, sexism, prejudice etc.

Biases

- How to avoid these negative consequences:
- 1. Be wary of those who try to define situations for you and create the categories for you.
- 2. Try to use more than one way to categorize and describe a person or event. If you use just one category, more likely to distort information to fit it in the category.
- 3. Try to think of people and events as unique.
- 4. When forming an impression consider the possibility that you might be wrong.

Relationship of Attitudes to Behavior

- Inconsistent support for attitudes and beliefs guiding behavior.
- Overall, suggest that attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviors.
- We only perceive a relationship between attitude and behavior.
- We tend to attribute the cause of a person's behavior to some personality trait or attitude related to that behavior rather than to situational factors.
- Correspondent inference: "he spilled the wine because he is clumsy."

Correspondent Inference

- Jones & Harris (1967).
- Subjects read essays written for and against a topic.
- Even when subjects were told that the writers had been forced to argue a certain point, the readers still attributed the cause of their behavior (the essay writing) to an attitude (either for or against the topic.)

Attitude Accessibility

- Fazio (1986)
- Attitude accessibility is the strength of the association between an object and your evaluation of it.
- Attitudes are used as a means to perceive and interpret complex situations and can serve as a heuristic to influence explanations, reasoning and judgments of situations.
- The more accessible an attitude, the more likely it is we will use it to define a situation.

Attitude Accessibility

- One way to measure attitude accessibility is by the speed one can make an evaluative response of an issue.
- Attitude accessibility can also be influenced by repeatedly having to express your opinions or by direct experience with the attitude object.

Acting on Perceptions

- Herr (1986)
- Priming subjects with exemplars of hostility or gentleness using a word puzzle game influenced their perception of an ambiguous description of a person.
- Those primed with the hostile exemplars described the character as hostile.

Acting on Perceptions

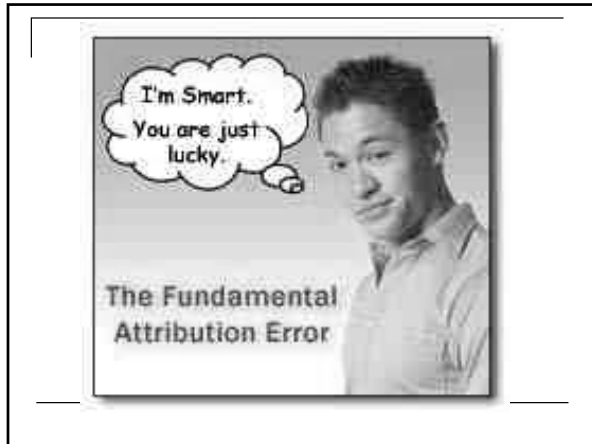
- Dweck (1999). Perceptions about intelligence that influence behavior.
- Those who view intelligence as fixed:
- Steer clear of challenges that might reveal their limitation
- Choose easier tasks
- Give up more easily
- Lie about their performance
- Choke on hard tests

Acting on Perceptions

- Those who view intelligence as malleable:
- Seek challenges
- Try to improve their abilities
- Try harder or try different strategies when things are challenging
- Are more resilient.

Bottom Line on Attitudes and Behavior

- Subtle situational variables are strong determinants of behavior.
- We overlook the importance of these situational variables and explain people's behavior in terms of assumptions about their personality.
- We assume people's attitudes do forecast their behavior, and use this assumption to erroneously interpret others' behaviors.



Fundamental Attribution Error

- We overestimate the importance of personality or dispositional factors in explaining the cause for social behavior.
- We lose sight of that fact that each individual plays many social roles, and we might be observing only one of them.
- For example, colleagues may describe a professor differently than his students would based on the social role they observe.

Fundamental Attribution Error

- Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz (1977).
- Randomly assigned subjects to one of two roles in a mock quiz game show: questioner or contestant.
- Observer watched and estimated each subject's overall knowledge.
- Just because a subject was randomly assigned to the role of questioner, they were perceived as being more knowledgeable.

Fundamental Attribution Error

- Far reaching social implications of fundamental attribution error.
- Assume a criminal committed crime because of unredeemable personality characteristics and ignore the impact of poverty, lack of job opportunity, illiteracy, etc.
- This attribution then determines how government funds are allocated—to prisons rather than to education, programs to alleviate poverty etc.

Actor-Observer Bias

- Attribute our own actions to situational factors but attribute the actions of others we observe to their personality characteristics.
- Give yourself the benefit of the doubt, but don't allow it for others.

Actor-Observer Bias

- Storms (1973). The actor-observer bias is a function of where your attention is focused.
- When you are focusing on yourself, you have access to the environment and personal history.
- When observing someone, you are focused on the person.
- When the point of view of an interaction was reversed by changing the camera angle, the attributions changed.
- When the actors saw themselves, they were more likely to explain their own behavior in terms of dispositional factors.

Actor-Observer Bias

- Prevent problems by changing the actor's and observer's perspectives.
- Promote empathy via role play.
- On an international level, use cultural exchange programs.

Self-Biases: Egocentric Thought

- We perceive ourselves as more central to events than is actually the case.
- We often believe our choices affect outcomes when they really do not.
- Langer (1975). Subjects bought lottery tickets—some picked their numbers, others were assigned them.
- When given the opportunity to sell their tickets back, those who chose their numbers sold their tickets for up to 4x the price.

Self-Biases: Egocentric Thought

- The Barnum Effect—a personality description composed of statements that are true of almost everyone.
- Explains the popularity of astrology.
- When we read the statement, we don't stop to think that other people feel the same way.
- Such statements can influence our expectations and behavior.
- We even show better memory for information that is related to ourselves.

Self-Biases: The Self-Serving Bias

- We tend to attribute our successes to dispositional factors.
- We tend to attribute our failures to situational factors.
- Attribute a good test score to ability and bad score to an unfair exam.
- Gamblers attribute their success to skills rather than luck.
- People rate themselves more favorably than others do.

Self-Biases: The Self-Serving Bias

- May be explained in terms of the access to different information actors and observers have.
- Self-serving bias may also have ego defensive features to protect our self-esteem and self-concepts.

Self-Biases: The Self-Serving Bias

- Self-serving bias increases when:
- We are highly involved in the behavior
- We feel personally responsible for the outcome of our behavior
- When the behavior is publicly observed by others.

Benefits of Self-Biases

- A team attributing their winning to stable causes and their losses to flukes prevents losing teams from being too psychologically devastated and allows them to continue playing.
- Optimism in overcoming tragic events and illness can lead to people to adopt better health practices and develop effective coping skills.
- Believing defeat is due to bad luck and can be overcome by effort and ability leads to more achievement and healthier thinking.
