CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL PERCEPTION: UNDERSTANDING OTHER PEOPLE

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 3 covers three main topics: impressions others make on us, attribution processes and biases, and the impressions we make on others. The chapter defines impression formation and discusses the roles of automatic and controlled processing in constructing social reality. The importance of these two modes of processing for social perception, behavior, and emotion is discussed. The section on impression formation includes discussions of the accuracy of impressions and the factors that affect the confidence we have in our impressions. The major section on attribution processes first defines internal and external attributions. Next, the chapter covers the two major theories of attribution: correspondent inference theory and covariation theory. The roles of consensus, consistency and distinctiveness in making causal attributions are covered along with how different mixes of these three factors produce different attributions. The chapter also discusses dual process models of attribution and how they contribute to what we know about the attribution process. There is also a major section on attribution biases covering: the fundamental attribution error, the sinister attribution error, the actor-observer bias, and the false consensus bias. Next, the chapter discusses some important social cognition processes such as schemas, stories, the self-fulfilling prophecy, heuristics and metacognition. The chapter concludes with material on optimism and pessimism and how distressing events affect one's happiness.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Impression formation: Automaticity and social perception
  - Automatic processing
  - The importance of automaticity in social perception
  - Automaticity and behavior
  - Automaticity and emotions
  - Controlled processing

- The impression others make on us: How do we "read" other people?
  - How accurate are our perceptions?
  - Confidence and impression formation
  - It is hard to catch a liar: Detecting Deception

- The attribution process: Deciding why people act as they do
- Heider's early work on attribution
- Correspondent inference theory
- Covariation theory
- Dual process models

- Attribution biases
  - Misattributions
  - The fundamental attribution error
  - The sinister attribution error: Paranoid social cognition
    - Being different and distinctive
    - Dependence and paranoid cognition
    - Uncertainty about social standing
  - Why we make the fundamental attribution error
  - Correcting the fundamental attribution error
  - The actor-observer bias
  - The false consensus bias

- Constructing an impression of others
  - The significance of first impressions
  - Schemas
    - Origins of schemas
    - The relationship between schemas and behavior
    - Assimilating new information into a schema
  - Stories
  - The confirmation bias
• Shortcuts to reality: Heuristics
  ▪ The availability heuristic
  ▪ The representativeness heuristic
  ▪ Counterfactual thinking
• How we view our social world: Thinking about thinking
  o Cognitive optimism and happiness
  o The incompetent, the inept: Are they happy?
  o The effects of distressing and joyful events on future happiness
  o Bottom line
• The Vincennes Revisited
• Chapter review
• Internet activity
• Suggestions for further reading

KEY TERMS
Impression formation (66)
Automatic processing (66)
Controlled processing (66)
Cognitive miser (66)
Attribution (76)
Internal attribution (76)
External attribution (76)
Correspondent inference (76)
Covariation principle (77)
Fundamental attribution error (82)
Sinister attribution error (83)
Actor-observer bias (85)
False consensus bias (87)
Primacy effect (87)
Belief perseverance (87)
Schema (88)
Implicit personality theory (88)
Self-fulfilling prophecy (88)
Behavioral confirmation (89)
Confirmation bias (91)
Heuristics (92)
Availability heuristic (92)
Representativeness heuristic (93)
Counterfactual thinking (94)
Metacognition (95)
Positive illusions (95)

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After reading Chapter 3, you should be able to:

- Explain the differences between automatic and controlled processing, and talk about the circumstances under which one or the other is more likely to predominate in a given social situation.
Here, you should understand the role of automatic processing in reducing the amount of cognitive effort expended when interpreting others' behaviors. More effortful, controlled processing takes over when people are forced to interpret inconsistent or disconfirming information or when they are motivated to form accurate impressions of others (such as when they are held accountable for their inferences).

- Describe the importance of automaticity in social perception, behavior and emotions.

You should understand that automatic processing often "primes" social perception, making certain interpretations of a situation more likely than others. You should also understand that much of our behavior is performed in automatic mode, without much thought. Finally, you should know that in many cases the expression of emotion is also automatic.

- Describe and explain the process of forming impressions of others.

You should learn about the accuracy of the impressions we form of others and how our ability to accurately read others relates to our own emotions. You should be aware of the relationship between confidence in impressions and accuracy of impressions. Additionally, you should also come away with knowledge about the ability to accurately detect deception and about the variables that relate to the ability of some individuals to detect deception.

- Define the concept of attribution and explain some of the general ideas involved in making attributions.

Attribution theorists are concerned with explaining the process by which people assign causes for their own and others' behaviors. So, you should understand that attribution theorists do not examine actual causes for behavior. Instead, they focus on studying perceived causes for behavior and the process by which these causes are determined (i.e., the process by which attribution takes place).

- Talk about the general distinction between internal and external attributions.

In this area, you should be able to differentiate between internal attributions, which involve attributing behavior to personality traits or characteristics inside the person, and
external attributions, which implicate social influences or stimuli outside of a person's control.

- Describe the basic assumptions of correspondent inference theory and covariation theory.

Correspondent inference and covariation theories are two major theories of attribution. You should understand the factors that contribute to forming correspondent inferences and the resulting internal attributions. You should also learn about how high versus low consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency would lead people to make person or situational attributions. You should to be cognizant of the variable combinations that lead to person or situational attributions. Consistency serves to strengthen the person or situational attributions stemming from consensus and distinctiveness information.

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- Describe dual process models of attribution.

You should understand how the two-step and three-step models of attribution extend what we know about the attribution process from covariation theory. You should appreciate that these models do not replace earlier theories, but rather add to our understanding of attribution processes.

- List and describe some biases that are common in the attribution process.

You should know what the fundamental attribution error is and why it occurs. You should know what the sinister attribution error is and know about the three conditions that make individuals mistrustful of others. You should also be able to understand the actor-observer bias and the false-consensus bias.

- Discuss how we form impressions of others and be cognizant of the importance of first impressions.
• Describe the role of schemas and stories in processing social information.

Included here is an understanding of how schemas contribute to individuals' tendencies to engage in self-fulfilling prophecies and how schemas differ from stories, which are usually more context specific and involve a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

• Talk about the various methods people use to form impressions of other people.

You should be able to explain the fundamental role of categorization in the impression formation process. The impression formation process actually involves a wide range of processes, such as primacy effects, self-fulfilling prophecies, confirmation biases (the tendency to attend to information that supports our beliefs), and assumptions about the types of traits that "go together" (implicit personality theory). Also, you should understand the specific role of category-based expectancies in forming initial impressions of others.

• Understand how we use cognitive shortcuts called heuristics in social perception and impression formation.

You should be able to distinguish between the availability heuristic, representativeness heuristic, and counterfactual thinking.

• Describe metacognition and how it relates to social behavior. You should learn about positive illusions, optimism, happiness, and how life events affect happiness.

KEY QUESTIONS

• What is impression formation?

• What are automatic and controlled processing?

• What is meant by a cognitive miser?

• Why is automatic processing so important to social perception, behavior, and emotion?
• Are our impressions of others accurate?
• What factors affect the confidence we have in our impressions?
• What is the attribution process?
• What are internal and external attributions?
• What is correspondent inference theory, and what factors enter into forming a correspondent inference?
• What are covariation theory and the covariation principle?
• How do consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information lead to an internal or external attribution?
• What is the dual process model of attribution, and what does it tell us about the attribution process?
• What is meant by attribution biases?
• What is the fundamental attribution error?
• What is the sinister attribution error, and when is it made?
• What is the actor-observer bias?
• What are the false consensus and the self-serving biases?
• What is the importance of first impressions?
• What are schemas, and what role do they play in social cognition?
• What is the self-fulfilling prophecy, and how does it relate to behavior?
• What roles do stories play in social cognition?
• What are the various types of heuristics that often guide social cognition?
• What is meant by meta-cognition?
• How do optimism and pessimism relate to social cognition and behavior?
• How do distressing events affect happiness?
PRACTICE TESTS

Multiple-Choice Questions

Choose the alternative that best completes the stem of each question.

1. According to your text, we tend to be cognitive misers when constructing social reality because we
   a. are too lazy to deal with complex information.
   b. would rather rationalize away information than deal with it.
   c. tend to have a limited ability to deal with information.
   d. none of the above.

2. When we construct social reality without much thought or effort we are using
   a. automatic processing.
   b. controlled processing.
   c. subliminal processing.
   d. unconscious processing.

3. ________________ involves processing information in an effortful careful way.
   a. Conscious processing
   b. Controlled processing
   c. Overt processing.
   d. Explicit processing

4. According to your text, most of our behavior is determined by
   a. free will and self-determination.
   b. conscious, controlled processing.
   c. nonconscious, automatic processing
   d. the behavior of others.
5. The unconscious mimicry of another's behavior in a social situation is known as the
   a. mirror image effect.
   b. actor-observer effect.
   c. rebound effect.
   d. chameleon effect.

6. Which of the following is true about the accuracy of our impressions of others?
   a. We are more confident in impressions of people we know than people we don't know.
   b. Usually, the more confident we are in an impression, the more accurate the impression.
   c. There is little relationship between confidence in an impression and accuracy.
   d. both a and b above
   e. both a and c above

7. In a study of the ability to detect deception, _________ were best at detecting deception.
   a. local police officers
   b. federal agents
   c. clinical psychologists
   d. academic psychologists

8. Social psychologists define attribution as the process of
   a. assigning the causes of behavior.
   b. forming impressions based on limited information.
   c. overcoming the tendency to use automatic processing in assigning the causes of behavior.
9. You see a person trip and drop her books all over the sidewalk. The first thing that comes to mind is that the person is a klutz. According to Heider's attribution model, you have made a(n)
   a. external attribution.
   b. internal attribution.
   c. inward attribution.
   d. extrinsic attribution.

10. An ______________ is when you attribute a behavior to something about a person.
    a. external attribution
    b. internal attribution
    c. inward attribution
    d. intrinsic attribution

11. According to the correspondent inference theory, we are likely to make an internal attribution for a person's behavior if
   a. the behavior was freely chosen.
   b. the person intended to perform the behavior.
   c. there are no identifiable external causes of behavior.
   d. both a and b
   e. all of the above

12. According to covariation theory, a situational attribution is made if you have
   a. high consensus, high consistency, and high distinctiveness.
   b. low consensus, low consistency, and low distinctiveness.
   c. low consensus, high consistency, and low distinctiveness.
   d. low consensus, high consistence, and high distinctiveness.
13. The fundamental attribution error involves a tendency to
   a. attribute a behavior to internal forces more readily than to external forces.
   b. ignore consensus information when making attributions.
   c. overestimate the influence of the situation when attributing causes for behavior.
   d. assume that internal and external factors operate equally in all behaviors.

14. The tendency to overattribute untrustworthiness to others is known as the
   a. fundamental attribution error.
   b. malevolent attribution error.
   c. paranoid attribution error.
   d. sinister attribution error.

15. After a teammate of yours strikes out in a baseball game, you think, "He really
    stinks." However, after you strike out next you think, "That pitcher must be throwing
    spitballs." This example illustrates the
   a. confirmation bias.
   b. fundamental reversal error.
   c. actor-observer bias.
   d. egocentric bias.

16. The false consensus bias involves the belief that
   a. you alone hold an opinion, while everyone else holds the same opinion.
   b. everyone else shares your feelings, opinions, and behaviors.
   c. everyone agrees with you when you take success for something you actually had
      nothing to do with.
   d. you tend to ignore consensus information when making attributions.

17. The primacy effect refers to the fact that
a. information we receive first has the most effect on our impression of another person.

b. information we receive last has the most effect on our impression of another person.

c. we place primary importance on impressions we form of people who are close to us.

d. we have the most favorable impressions of people we have met early in life, as opposed to those we meet later in life.

e. none of the above

18. ___________________ refers to the fact that our first impressions typically endure, even if we encounter information that contradicts that first impression.

a. Belief persistence

b. Impression freezing

c. Belief perseverance

d. Belief tenacity

19. . Which of the following is true of schemas?

a. They influence what we remember and how we evaluate new information.

b. They help us to organize and understand our experiences.

c. They help us to predict what will happen next in a situation.

d. both b and c

e. all of the above

20. You overestimate the number of people who die in airplane crashes each year because you can easily call to mind images of airplane crashes you saw on the news. This is an example of

a. the availability heuristic.

b. the representative heuristic.

c. the accessibility heuristic.
d. counterfactual thinking.

Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

21. ___________________ is the process by which we make judgments about others.

22. ___________________ involves processing information in an effortful, careful way.

23. We tend to be ___________________, which means that we prefer the least effortful means of processing social information.

24. Our modest ability to read other people accurately occurs because we focus on ___________________.

25. Social psychologists call the process of assigning causes for behavior (our own and that of others) causal ___________________.

26. Assigning the cause of behavior to some situation or event outside the person's control is a(n) _____________________.

27. When observers assign the cause of behavior to an internal source (e.g., character or personality), they are making a(n) _____________________.

28. A(n) ____________________ is made when we conclude that a person's overt behavior is caused by, or corresponds to, a person's internal characteristics or beliefs.

29. According to Harold Kelley, the basic rule applied to causal analysis is the ____________________, which states: "An effect is attributed to one of its possible causes with which, over time, it covaries."

30. The ____________________ model of attribution suggests that we make an adjustment to an automatic initial attribution.

31. The tendency to underestimate situational factors and to attribute causes of behavior to the character or personality of the individual is the _____________________.

32. Actors prefer external attributions for their own behavior, especially if the outcomes are bad, while observers tend to make internal attributions for the same behavior; this is known as the _____________________.

33. The ____________________ is the tendency to believe that our own feelings and behavior are shared by everyone else.
34. A ______________________ is the observation that earliest information plays a powerful role in our eventual impression of an individual.

35. A(n) ______________________ involves the belief that personality characteristics are linked and helps us make quick impressions of others.

36. When our expectations about ourselves or others become reality, a(n) ______________________ has occurred.

37. According to the ______________________, we impose a structure on complex information by constructing a coherent story, and use the story to connect facts and feelings concerning events.

38. ______________________ are shortcuts, rules of thumb, that we rely on to organize our perceptions of reality.

39. A shortcut used to estimate the frequency or likelihood of an event based on how quickly examples come to mind is the ________________________

40. When we make judgments based on an assessment of how representative something is of a category, we are using the ________________________.

41. The construction of scenarios to try to figure out what will or might happen, which takes the linguistic form of "if only....," is the ________________________.

42. The way we think about thinking is known as ________________________.

43. ______________________ involve overoptimistic one's ability to handle stressful situations.

44. According to your text, a person who lives in a world of unappealing choices is ________________________.

45. We have a(n) ________________________ that protects us from gloom and doom, even under the most adverse conditions.

Answers

Multiple Choice

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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

PERSONAL ASSESSMENT/OBSERVATION

One of the ways people organize social behavior is to devise a story. Researchers who have studied the story model have noted that when individuals have to organize complex social information they begin to form a story and that story then guides their future understanding and organization of incoming information.

The story model has been studied in the context of criminal trials. Jurors begin to form one or more potential stories that may explain what happened in the case. If you have access to cable TV, try to watch a fairly short criminal trial. Note when you start to form some general hypothesis about the trial ("Jones was filled with jealousy, and it's probable that he bought the life insurance policy on his brother's life with some foul deed in mind."). If you devised more than one story, how did you decide which story was the most useful in organizing the information presented in the trial? It would also be interesting to have a friend do the same thing independently - you might be surprised as to what type of story she or he devises.

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: ATTRIBUTIONS IN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Attributions, the causes we assign to other people's behavior, have significant behavioral consequences. That is, when you make an attribution as to why someone behaved as she did, it affects not only how she responds to you but also how you in turn respond to her. Attributions are especially important in close relationships. The typical attributional patterns individuals use in relationships often determine the health of that relationship.
This exercise requires that you promise anonymity to your participants. As you will readily understand, it is important in an ethical sense, as well as in ensuring that people respond honestly, that you can guarantee them that even you will not know the name of the people who will respond to your questions.

Devise several scenarios (e.g., a wife who gets home late from work, causing the couple to miss an important engagement, or a friend who says something hurtful about a person). Give participants each of the scenarios and ask them to think of a similar social relationship they are now in or one they used to be in. Or, if they can't meet either criterion, ask them to imagine a relationship. Tell them to write a paragraph describing how they would respond to the scenario within their own relationship.

When you analyze the responses, note that the most damaging response a partner can make is a causal attribution that the partner's negative behavior fits a dispositional, stable, and global pattern: "She does those annoying things because she is characteristically inconsiderate; she has always acted this way and always will." In addition, the partner will be seen as having had control over the even and as having intentionally behaved in a negative way. The most positive response is situational, unstable, and specific: "This is a rare event, caused by forces beyond the control of my partner, and it probably won't happen again."

If you can set this up so that you will be absolutely certain anonymity can be maintained, you could ask your participants to rate the state of their current relationship as "very satisfying," "fairly satisfying," or "unsatisfying." You should find a correspondence between their attributional style and the state of the relationship.

**KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: PERSONAL ASSESSMENT**

As you devised some of the scenarios used in the preceding exercise, you probably conjured up events that have occurred in your own life. If not, this is a good time to do so. An instructive personal exercise is to try to analyze what your own attributional pattern is. Consider the relationships you are in now and those you used to be in. Has your attributional pattern changed? To what degree does your attributional strategy depend on that of your partner? In fact, is your strategy independent of your partners?