Social Psychology

Lecture 3: Social Perception

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In our previous lesson (Lesson 2: The Self in a Social World), we've seen how our own self-concept and self-esteem influence our behavior. However, the social world is a two-way street. Just as we are busy managing our own identities, we are simultaneously acting as social detectives – constantly observing, labeling, and judging the people around us.

Social Perception is the process by which we form impressions of others and try to explain why they do what they do. We shift now from "Who am I?" to "Who are you, and why did you act that way?"

Our exploration of Social Perception is built upon three primary areas of focus. We will begin by examining how we form impressions of others, move into analyzing the cognitive biases that shape our social reality, and conclude by investigating the effect of mood in our cognition.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. explain how initial information carries more weight than later information in social settings.
2. articulate original, real-world scenarios that demonstrate the mechanics of social judgment, specifically focusing on the primacy and recency effects, the 'what-is-beautiful-is-good' stereotype, the halo effect, belief perseverance, and the self-fulfilling prophecy.
3. analyze how the illusion of control, negativity bias, optimistic bias and counterfactual thinking can distort our perception of reality.
4. explain how current emotions shape the recall of past experiences.

HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE LIKE?

When you meet someone for the first time, your brain doesn't just sit there and watch. Instead, it starts building a "model" of who that person is in record time. This process is known as Social Perception, and it answers one of our most basic human question: *How do we decide what other people are like?*

A. Primacy effect

- The phenomenon whereby the first pieces of information to which we are exposed have the most impact on our judgments.
- Can you sense the difference between these two descriptions?

  A: John is intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious.

  B: John is envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent.

  In description A, the very first word you read is "intelligent." Because this is a highly positive trait, your brain immediately "anchors" John as a capable, smart person. The second word, "industrious," reinforces this.

  In description B, the primacy effect works against John. Because the description starts with "envious" and "stubborn," you anchor him as a "difficult" person. By the time you get to "intelligent," you don't see it as a virtue but as a threat. You might think, "He's smart, which just makes him a more dangerous or calculated person."

- In political polls and in primary election voting, candidates benefit from being listed first on the ballot. The effect is most pronounced in primary elections or non-partisan contests where voters may not have strong party cues to guide their decision. In these cases, being listed first can provide a statistically significant boost (Moore, 2004).
- Filipino politicians also take advantage of the primacy effect. Since the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) typically lists candidates alphabetically by surname, many politicians have historically used aliases or legally changed their names to start with "A."

B. Recency effect

- The phenomenon whereby the last pieces of information to which we are exposed have heightened impact on our judgments.

  "John is envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent."

- If you read this list quickly and are tasked with describing John immediately, the Recency Effect suggests you will see him as intelligent and industrious. Because these were the last things you heard, they are still 'echoing' in your short-term memory.
- The Recency Effect is most powerful when:
  - There is a delay between the first set of information and the last set
  - You have to make a decision immediately after the last bit of info.

C. Halo effect

- When one positive thing is known or believed about a person, we tend to infer that the individual is positive overall and thus has other positive features.
- Research on halo effect:
  - Nisbett and Wilson (1977) conducted a study that demonstrated the Halo Effect. Their study found that halo effect operates largely on a subconscious level. In the experiment, researchers showed two groups of college students different videos of the same French professor. In one video, the professor acted warm and flexible, while in the other video, the professor was cold and rigid. The professor's physical appearance, accent, and mannerisms were identical in both clips.

    The result of the study strongly supported the Halo Effect. Students who saw the "pleasant" version rated the professor's physical appearance, mannerisms, and accent as attractive and appealing. When interviewed, the students insisted that their personal liking of the professor had no impact on their ratings of his physical traits or accent. Conversely, the students who saw the "unpleasant" version rated the exact same physical traits and accent as irritating or unattractive.

- **What-is-Beautiful-is-Good Effect**
  - The term was proposed by Karen Dion, Ellen Berscheid, and Elaine Walster in 1972.
  - formally known as the Physical Attractiveness Stereotype
  - The phenomenon wherein beautiful things are imbued with positivity and activate positive things in the mind.
  - In this cognitive bias, individuals subconsciously attribute positive personality traits and abilities to people who are physically attractive.
  - Example: The belief that physical beauty is also equated to moral and intellectual excellence, assuming attractive people are also smarter, kinder, more competent, and more honest, even when we have no evidence to support those claims.

D. Belief perseverance

- Holding on to one's beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence.
- Research on belief perseverance:
  - Anderson and colleagues (1980) conducted an experiment where participants were asked to evaluate whether risk-takers or cautious individuals made better firefighters based on specific case studies provided by the researchers. One group was led to believe risk-prone people were more successful, while the other was led to the opposite conclusion. To solidify these beliefs, participants were asked to write out explanations for why their assigned theory made sense such as risk-takers are "brave" or cautious people have "fewer accidents."

    Researchers then revealed that the initial case studies were entirely fabricated and provided no real evidence. Despite the original information being completely discredited, the participants nevertheless held to their self-generated explanations and therefore continued to believe that risk-prone people really do make better (or worse) firefighters. This demonstrates that once we have "rationalized" a concept, we become resistant to changing our minds, even when the foundational truth of that concept is removed.

E. Self-fulfilling prophecy

- Coined by Robert Merton in 1948
- A belief that leads to its own fulfillment.
- If we expect that something will happen, we will act in ways that elicit exactly what we expected.
- Famous example of self-fulfilling prophecy is the Pygmalion effect proposed by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in 1968
- Experiment on Pygmalion effect:
    - The researchers went to an elementary school and gave students a standard IQ test. However, they told the teachers the test was a special "Harvard" assessment designed to identify "academic bloomers" or the students who were about to have a "brain growth spurt" and get much smarter. In reality, the researchers randomly selected about 20% of the students to be labeled as "bloomers." There was no actual difference in potential between these students and their classmates; the only difference was the label given to the teachers.

      Result of the study: When the students were re-tested at the end of the school year, the "bloomer" group showed significantly higher gains in IQ scores compared to the other children.

      Why is that? Because the teachers believed these specific children were smarter, they started treating them differently without even realizing it. They provided the "bloomers" with more encouraging social and emotional climate, more difficult and varied teaching materials, more chances to participate and longer wait times to answer questions and ore detailed and helpful critiques.

BIAS IN SOCIAL COGNITION

Social cognition the scientific study of how we think about one another. We like to think that we are incredibly logical beings. When we think about making decisions, we picture ourselves carefully weighing up all aspects of a situation and making informed

decisions, but that's not always the case. Our social perceptions are rarely objective; we are constantly influenced by underlying biases that color how we interpret the actions and character of those around us. This bias in our cognition gives rise to social phenomenon like illusion of control, negativity bias, optimistic bias and counterfactual thinking.

A. Illusion of control

- coined by Ellen Langer in 1975
- The perception that uncontrollable events are somehow controllable and that one can influence events that actually depend upon chance.
- This illusion is seen in gambling behaviors.
- Research on illusion of control:
  - Langer (1975) demonstrated that people often behave as if they can purely influence events that actually depend upon chance. To test this, she conducted an experiment where office workers were sold $1 lottery tickets; half of the participants were allowed to choose their own ticket, while the other half were simply assigned one by the researcher. When researchers offered to buy the tickets back, the people who picked their own numbers demanded significantly more money (over four times more) compared to those who were assigned numbers.
  - In another study, Langer (1975) examined how the appearance of a competitor influences risk-taking in games of pure chance by having participants play a card-cutting game against a "confederate" actor. The researcher used two different types of opponents to see how people would react: one looked sharp and acted confident, while the other looked messy and acted nervous and awkward. Despite the fact that cutting cards is entirely a matter of luck with no skill involved, participants consistently bet significantly more money when facing the awkward opponent than they did against the confident one.
  - Wohl & Enzle (2002) found that when people are allowed to throw the dice or spin the wheel themselves, they report a higher expectation of winning. They feel as though their "personal luck" or "touch" can influence the outcome.

B. Negativity bias

- coined and popularized by psychologists Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman in 2001
- The tendency for people to be more sensitive to and more likely to notice and remember negative information than positive information.
- Research on negativity bias:
  - Researchers measured the electrical activity in people's brain when they viewed positive photos, neutral photos and negative photos.
  - Result: larger brain waves, reflecting a dramatic increase in brain activity, were observed when participants viewed the negative photos as opposed to when they viewed the positive or neutral photos.
- ***Is there any value to focusing on the negative?*** Yes. From an evolutionary perspective, focusing on bad can be a life-saving tool. If we are wired to protect ourselves from danger, it follows that we would pay more attention to potential warning signs than to positive information.

C. Optimistic bias

- Also known as "unrealistic optimism"
- coined by psychologist Neil Weinstein in 1980
- The belief that you are less likely than others to experience negative events and more likely to experience positive ones.
- Research in optimistic bias:
- Weinstein (1980) asked college students to compare their own chances of experiencing various life events with the chances of their peers. He found that participants consistently assumed that they were much more likely than the average person to land a high-paying job or buy a nice house. Conversely, they viewed themselves as significantly less likely than their classmates to encounter negative events like divorce, accidents, or illness.

D. Counterfactual thinking

- The tendency to image alternative scenarios and outcomes that might have happened, but didn't.

- The more significant and unlikely the event, the more intense the counterfactual thinking. Bereaved people who have lost a spouse or a child in a vehicle accident, or a child to sudden infant death syndrome, commonly report replaying and undoing the event (Davis et al., 1995).
- Most people live with more regret over things they didn't do than what they did, such as, "I should have told my father I loved him before he died" or "I wish I had been more serious in college"

D.1. Upward counterfactual – the tendency to imagine better outcome. Counterfactual thinking can have a dramatic effect on a person's emotional reaction to an event or situation. Upward counterfactual thinking has a negative effect on a person's mood.

- If you imagined a better outcome for an event (like getting a 95% on that exam instead of a 89%), you could end up feeling pretty bad about your performance, or envious of those classmates who got higher grades even if 89% is actually a good grade. You're comparing your reality to a perfect version in your head.
- Consider two students -- one scores 75% and the other a 79%. Interestingly, the student with a higher grade of 79% is typically more frustrated because they are just one point away from 80%. This happens because the tiny gap makes it easy for the brain to obsessively "re-run" the test, imagining how a single different answer could have changed their grade. Even though 79% is technically the better score, it feels much worse because the "what if" scenario is so much easier to visualize.
- Olympic medalist: When looking at the results of a competition, which athlete do you think feels more satisfied: the one who took home the silver or the one who won the bronze? As illustrated by a 1995 study of Husted and colleagues, it was found that silver medalists are often less happy than bronze medalists because they are likely to engage in upward counterfactual. They focus on the split-second delay or the minor stumble that kept them from winning the gold. This creates a sense of loss rather than achievement.

  Silver medalists → less happy because they are "losing the gold"

D.2. Downward counterfactual – the tendency to imagine worse outcome.

- Imagine a student who scored 75% on an exam. Instead of being upset with their score, they realize that it is the passing cutoff for the course. They think to themselves, "If I had missed just one or two more questions, I would have failed the exam." Because they are imagining a worse outcome (failing) rather than a better one (getting an 80%), they feel a sense of relief and satisfaction with their grade, despite it being a lower score.
- Olympic medalist: The bronze medalist is often happier because their most obvious alternative was finishing in fourth place and leaving with no medal at all.

  Bronze medalists → they are happier because they are "winning a spot on the podium"

EFFECT OF MOOD ON COGNITION

The way we think is deeply intertwined with how we feel. This relationship isn't just a coincidence; it's a psychological mechanism that influences how we process information, solve problems, and perceive the world around us.

A. Mood congruence effect

- When we are in a particular mood, our brain naturally prioritizes information that matches that feeling. We are more likely to remember positive information when in positive mood, and negative information when in negative mood.
- Being in a positive mood makes you tend to think more expansively and creatively. You become more open to new ideas, better at seeing the "big picture," and more likely to find connections between unrelated concepts. Because you aren't focused on threats, you feel free to take risks and give others the benefit of the doubt.
- Being in a negative mood often narrows your focus, making your thinking more detail-oriented, cautious, and sometimes overly critical. While this can make you more realistic or better at finding errors, it can also lead to becoming stuck on minor flaws.

B. Mood dependent memory

- This refers to the fact that what we remember when in a given mood is influenced in part by what was learned when previously in that mood.
- Do you get nervous when you take exams? Do you feel like you forget everything, only to remember it all hours later when you're just relaxing? Think about your state of mind when you study, if you are calm when you study, the principle of mood dependent memory tells us you’re more likely to recall the information you studied when you're feeling calm. If you are a person who gets nervous when you take a test, you might actually remember more of the test material if you study when you're feeling nervous.

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