

PSYCHOLOGY OF  
SOCIAL COGNITION: A  
BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

Social cognition is the process by which we make sense of the social world. This includes how we form impressions of others (social perception), how we view ourselves (self perception), and how we explain our own and other people's behaviour (known as attribution).

## SOCIAL PERCEPTION

When meeting people for the first time, we form impressions of them very quickly. Much of this impression must be assumptions because we cannot tell what a person is really like in a few moments.

A key process in forming impressions is the primacy effect. Aronson et al (1999) define it as the "process whereby our first impression of another person causes us to interpret his or her subsequent behaviour in a manner consistent with the first impression" (p128).

A lot of attention is paid at the beginning of an interaction, and information that fits the initial impression is noted. This is known as interpretative set. There is also the mistaken belief that the first impression is the real one. Though, in fact, people are often on their best behaviour at the beginning of an interaction, and so this is not the real them.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The basic principle is that first impressions matter. Asch (1946) gave a list of five characteristics to participants to see what impression they formed. Two of the characteristics were positive and three were negative. Depending on which way the list was presented, a different impression was formed. However, this was artificial and used only a list of adjectives.

Luchins (1957) used a story instead. The "story of Jim" involved half of the story where he was extravert and half introvert. Depending on which half was read first, different impressions were formed of Jim. For example, where the extravert half came first, 71% of the participants said Jim was friendly compared to 54% where the introvert half was read first.

Working with real impressions, Park (1986) asked students in a tutorial group to keep a diary of what they thought about their fellow students after each class. The best predictor of the overall impression at the end of the term was the impression after the first meeting.

There is an exception to the primacy effect, and this is called the recency effect. If there is a time gap between the first time a person is met and the second, the more recent impression will matter more. It is almost as if the impression is formed again. Luchins found that when leaving a gap between the extravert half and the introvert half of the story (in that order), the impression formed of Jim was more introvert.

#### CENTRAL TRAITS

The main alternative explanation for forming impressions of others at a first meeting is known as "central traits". This explanation proposes that we notice key characteristics quickly about the individual, and the rest of their characteristics are then assumed.

Asch (1946) used a list of six characteristics with a seventh that varied between the two conditions in the experiment (table 1). This last characteristic was either "warm" or "cold". Just changing this last trait led to very different impressions when the participants were asked to tick one of a pair of adjectives (eg: generous-ungenerous) (table 2).

INTELLIGENCE  
SKILFUL  
INDUSTRIOUS  
DETERMINED  
PRACTICAL  
CAUTIOUS  
  
WARM OR COLD

Table 1 - Characteristics used by Asch (1946).

% DESCRIBING INDIVIDUAL AS:	WARM	COLD
GENEROUS	100	12
WISE	95	11
HAPPY	100	10

Table 2 - Example of Asch's (1946) results.

"Warm" and "cold" are central traits, and are triggers to the rest of an individual's characteristics (peripheral traits); ie: "warm" is linked to positive traits and "cold" to negative ones. Asch tried the same experiment with the traits "polite" and "blunt" instead of "warm" and "cold". But they did not influence

the impression formed in the same way.

Widmeyer and Loy (1988) used "warm" and "cold" in a real-life situation of a guest lecturer at a Canadian university. The students had an introduction sheet about the lecturer which varied in the one word ("warm" or "cold") for half of the audience. The "warm" group formed a positive impression of the lecturer, and the "cold" group negative (table 3).

WARM	COLD
sociable	unsociable
good-natured	irritable
humane	ruthless
interesting	boring

Table 3 - Examples of differences found in Widmeyer and Loy (1988).

#### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Much of the classic research for this topic is Western-based, and focuses on the importance of the individual in an individualistic society. But in other cultures (particularly those less individualistic), the forming of impressions of others shows differences.

Shweder and Bourne (1982) asked 70 Indian and 17 American adults to describe others. The majority of Americans' statements were "context-free" (eg: "he is unhelpful"), while the Indians' statements were more "context-specific" (eg: "he is hesitant to help his family"). Thus what is attended to in forming impressions could vary between cultures. In other words, what group does an individual belong to may be more important in non-Western cultures than who is that individual.

But what features one attends to during the first interaction can be varied. Trafimow et al (1991) used American and Chinese students at an American university. The former group were asked to concentrate on their families before forming impressions of an individual in a scenario, and this led to more "context-specific" answers. The Chinese students who concentrated on their individuality gave more "context-free" traits in their impressions from the scenario.

#### SOCIAL SCHEMA

Another way that individuals make sense of the social world is by the creation of social schema. These are cognitive frameworks built up through experience, and are the basis of social behaviour.

More formally, Fiske and Taylor (1991) define a schemata as "a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and relations among those attributes".

Building up pictures of how the social world is seems sensible, but they then come to influence our perception of the world. In other words, we tend to fit the world into our schema rather than the other way around. So, for example, in ambiguous situations there is a tendency to perceive the world as we feel it should be.

Duncan (1976) produced a short film of two men talking and ended with one pushing the other. There was no sound to the film, and the push was ambiguous (ie: it could be in fun or as a sign of aggression). In the film, the men were either both white, both black, or mixed with different men doing the pushing.

The participants who watched the film were all white American college students, and they had to explain the push. When the pusher was black, approximately 90% said it was aggressive compared to approximately 40% when a white man did the push.

Schema do simplify the social world, and help us to adapt to complex social demands. But they do influence what we remember about the social world.

There are a number of different types of schemata:

#### i) Role schemata

The principles of how people should behave in particular roles. Often these are called stereotypes. Stereotyping is the process by which individuals are placed into categories based on an obvious characteristic (eg: appearance). Individuals are assumed to be the same as all members of that category.

Physical attractiveness is an important trigger to stereotyping in Western society. Dion et al (1990 quoted in Fraser and Burchell 2001) found that in collectivist cultures group attributes, like family, are more important. Chinese students at a Canadian university were asked to describe individuals in eight black and white photographs. The students tended to pay more attention to the name (and thus the clues to family status).

#### ii) Person schemata

Information about people we know is our impression of people. There is the belief that certain characteristics go together, and this is known as "implicit personality theories".

Rosenberg et al (1968) asked students to describe people they knew using two adjectives only. A clear pattern emerged of what characteristics are believed to go together. For example, "sociable and warm", and "unsociable and moody", but not "unsociable and happy".

### iii) Event schemata

A framework about what should happen in certain situations (eg: shopping). Schank and Abelson (1977) prefer to call them "scripts".

### iv) Self schemata

The information we store about ourselves.

Each set of schema will have prototypes (ie standard examples of the information) that are called to memory in general situations.



## ATTRIBUTION

When trying to explain people's behaviour (and our own), there are two types of explanation used:

- i) internal cause (known as dispositional attribution) - motives, intentions, personality of the actor in the situation;
- ii) external cause (situational attribution) - situation, other people, and physical features of the environment.

EXAMPLE	DISPOSITIONAL ATTRIBUTION	SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTION
tripping up on street	clumsy	uneven kerb
failing exam	not clever enough	difficult exam paper; late night beforehand

### THEORIES OF ATTRIBUTION

#### 1. CORRESPONDENT INFERENCE THEORY (Jones and Davis 1965)

This theory tries to explain the circumstances under which we attribute actions to dispositional factors. In practice, situations are ambiguous, and there is little information about what is happening, so much of the attribution process must be assumption.

The assumption here is a corresponding inference ie to infer that both behaviour and intention correspond to some underlying feature of personality. For example, X is known to be argumentative; we see X in argument; therefore attribution that X started argument. The actor must be in a situation where they are not forced to do the behaviour.

Other processes are also involved in the attribution here, particularly when there is little information available about the situation:

a) Analysis of uncommon effects - when a choice is available to the actor, the one chosen against the one not chosen is used to tell us about the personality of the actor.

"In desirable residential area" is attributed as important to the individual; ie: status conscious as personality characteristic as this is different about house chosen.

EXAMPLE - chooses house A

HOUSE A	HOUSE B	HOUSE C
*well insulated	well insulated	well insulated
*in desirable residential area	not in desirable area	not in desirable area
*near station	near station	near station

b) Norms of situation and role expectations - non-conformist behaviour is used to make the dispositional attribution. In other words, only behaviour that stands out is noticed in attributing personality characteristics of the actor.

Jones and Gerard (1967) asked participants to listen to supposed job applicants on tape talking about themselves. The participants were told the qualities appropriate to the job. They paid more attention to the opposite of these qualities when attributing the personality of the applicants.

## 2. COVARIANCE MODEL (Kelley 1967)

This model looks at how the attribution between internal or external causes is made. There are three criteria that are used, and the coincidence of these is what matters. The criteria are consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency (table 4).

	LOW	HIGH
consensus - extent to which other people behave in same way	only one: dispositional attribution	everybody: situational attribution
distinctiveness - whether person behaves in same way in similar situations	same: dispositional attribution	only case: situational attribution
consistency - how stable is behaviour over time in same situation	only case: dispositional attribution	same: situational attribution

Table 4 - Consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency in the covariance model.

EXAMPLE: LEAVING TIP AT RESTAURANT

(A)	CONSENSUS	HIGH	nobody tips
	DISTINCTIVENESS	HIGH	usually tip in restaurants
	CONSISTENCY	HIGH	never tip here
	ATTRIBUTION		external (poor service)
(B)	CONSENSUS	LOW	everybody tips
	DISTINCTIVENESS	LOW	never tips
	CONSISTENCY	HIGH	never tips here
	ATTRIBUTION		internal (mean individual)

McKnight (1994) applied covariance model to attempted suicide among adolescent prisoners.

	HIGH	LOW
DISTINCTIVENESS	no prior history	prior history
CONSENSUS	other inmates	no other
CONSISTENCY	(low) not before	(high) other attempts
ATTRIBUTION	external (institution)	internal (individual problems)

EVALUATION OF COVARIANCE MODEL

Information for all three criteria is not always available, and actors are not objective information processors. There is a tendency to pay more attention to certain things; eg: consistency; or attributional biases influence the process.

3. CAUSAL SCHEMATA (Kelley 1973)

Kelley adapted his ideas from the covariation model because the attributional process is not ideal. Usually information is not available from past behaviour, and so attribution relies on the individual incident.

In this situation, observers rely on their knowledge of how cause and effect works. This is known as the "causal schemata", and there are two types (and two rules):

i) Multiple necessary causes - different effects tell us about different causes. In other words, some effects can only occur because of multiple factors. For example, somebody insults you, and later another person means they are a rude person.

ii) Multiple sufficient causes - several causes could be due to one effect. For example, an individual says they like the same music as you and your friends: it could be due to their tastes (dispositional) or conformity to the group (situational). In such a situation, there is the "discounting rule", according to Kelley. If enough information exists to support situational cause, then discount (ignore) dispositional information. The person is conforming to the group.

While the "augmenting principle" notes the confirmatory information to support the attribution made. For example, a person who is kind to you, and others say they are kind, then a dispositional attribution is made that this person is kind. Where there are multiple possible causes, individuals have preferences for the cause chosen.

All of the theories are challenged by the fact that attribution is more often influenced by short-cuts, known as attributional biases.

## ATTRIBUTIONAL BIASES

### 1. FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

This is the tendency to overemphasise internal causes for the actor's behaviour, and underestimate the role of situational factors. Thus making the behaviour of others appear more predictable, and apparently enhance our sense of control over the environment.

Jones and Harris (1967) showed the fundamental attribution error at work in a classic experiment. Using American students and controversial issues of the time, like Cuba, participants were asked in front of everybody to argue against their own views.

If the participants were convincing, the observers attributed the views as being those of the individual (ie internal disposition). In other words, the observers underemphasised the situational factors (ie: the participants were told to argue that way). There is the mistaken belief that individuals who are convincing must mean what they say (ie: it is part of their personality - internal attribution). Thus actors are mistaken for their characters, and "con-artists" are able to succeed in their deceptions.

The only occasion where the fundamental attribution error did not occur in the above experiment was where the speaker was seen to have an ulterior motive.

### 2. ACTOR-OBSERVER EFFECT

The process of attribution is different depending on whether we are involved or not. The actor-observer effect is the tendency to explain our own (observer) motives and others' (actor) motives for the same behaviour in different ways. The observer attributes an internal explanation for their behaviour (eg: personality), and situational explanations for the actor's behaviour.

Nisbet et al (1973) asked students to explain the reasons for their behaviour and for their friends in the same situation; eg: course choices. When explaining their behaviour, individuals gave internal attributions (eg: interest in the course; personality), but for friends situational attributions were made (eg: quality of course).

### 3. SELF-SERVING BIAS

The attribution process is different again if we are trying to explain our good or bad behaviour or events to ourselves or others. We make an internal attribution for good things (ie: our own efforts), and a situational attribution for bad things.

Lau and Russell (1980) studied this bias among American sports coaches. When the team won, 80% of the coaches referred to their own part in the win, and when the team lost, 50% of the coaches mentioned circumstances. The researchers called this the "I win because of me, I lose because of you" effect.

Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, can be seen to use similar language: if the team wins it is "we", but with a loss, it is "they" in post-match interviews.

One exception to the self-serving bias is among depressed individuals who use the opposite approach: good events are given a situational attribution (eg: luck), and bad events are due to an internal attribution (eg: bad person). Whether this is a cause or a product of depression is not clear.

### 4. JUST WORLD HYPOTHESIS

The just world hypothesis (Lerner 1980) is part of the process of making sense of events in the world that happen to others and to the self. It is a form of attributional bias. For Lerner and Miller (1978), "people have a need to believe that their environment is a just and orderly place where people usually get what they deserve".

The classic experiment is by Jones and Aronson (1973). They wrote a number of scenarios about a woman being attacked by a stranger. The participants reading the stories were more likely to blame the victim for their misfortune in certain circumstances. For example, the woman was described as a virgin in one version of the story, or as wearing provocative clothes in another version. In the latter case, the victim was blamed more for her attack.

By blaming the individual for their misfortune, we are able to psychologically protect ourselves against random events (Lipkus et al 1996). Believing that we would not do that, we feel that we are safe from such misfortunes. For example, if I don't dress provocatively, I won't get attacked. But this is an attribution process, it is not necessarily how the world is.

However, just world beliefs as a defensive attribution is more prevalent in cultures where extremes of wealth and poverty exist, as a means to justify their existence. Using the Just World Belief Scale, Furnham (1993) found belief in a just world highest in India and South Africa; middle rankings in USA, Australia, Hong Kong and Zimbabwe; and lowest in Britain and Israel.

## 5. HINDSIGHT BIAS

This is the tendency to judge events differently after knowing the outcome.

## SELF PERCEPTION

Self perception is the way we view ourselves. Much of our understanding about ourselves comes from the reaction and behaviour of others towards us.

Secord and Backman (1974) apply their three components of attitudes to self-perception:

i) Cognitive component - this is what we think about ourselves, and is linked to factual information about our self image. This includes socially relevant facts like chronological age, names, height, weight, physical appearance. However, all of these are judged within social expectations (eg: pressure to be thin in Western society).

ii) Affective component - how we feel about ourselves. The self-esteem is our feelings of like and dislike about ourselves. It is the way we evaluate ourselves. The smaller the gap between the self image and the ideal self (how we wish we were), the higher will be the self-esteem. The larger the gap, the lower will be the self-esteem.

iii) Behavioural component - what we actually do. It is possible to learn about ourselves from watching our own behaviour. This may seem strange if we are in control of our behaviour. But there are many situational influences on our behaviour, and we are not completely in conscious control of our behaviour.

Bem (1972) proposed that we watch ourselves in the same way as we watch other people in order to understand them. Thus we are applying the principles of social perception to ourselves.

An alternative view is that the self is managed to influence the impression others form of us. This is known as impression management.

## IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Schlenker (1980) defines impression management as a "conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions".

While Berkowitz (1975) points out that people "act in ways designed to please, or not affront, those around them - not because they are intrinsically phoney - but because they have learned that others are important to them".

The process of impression management is done through

the individual's behaviour, but also through their appearance (eg: clothes worn) and their possessions. This latter aspect is particularly a product of Western society. The belief that having certain possessions (particularly fashionable ones) attributes moral characteristics to individuals (Brewer 2002).

Baumeister (1982) believes that individuals are trying to gain the audience's approval with impression management, but also to create a particular image of oneself in the audience's eyes that corresponds to one's ideals.

Goffman (1959) uses the analogy of the theatre. Being "on stage" is the public face, and only a few people see "behind the stage" (the private self). It is very important to maintain "face" for the public self. A lose of "face" is embarrassing, but also threatens the order of social relations.

Table 5 gives examples of the processes in trying to impress another person.

STRATEGY	TECHNIQUE	AIM
behaviour matching	match target person's behaviour	seen as likeable/ trustworthy
conformity to situational norms	expected behaviour	seen as likeable/ trustworthy
ingratiation	flatter and agree	seen as likeable
consistency	not changing behaviour all time	seen as competent
self-promotion	brag	seen as competent
exemplification ie suffer for cause	self-promotion	seen as morally pure
supplication ie advertise weakness	admit failure	seen as weak
"basking in reflected glory"	associate with people who are successful	seen as successful
intimidation	threaten	seen as dangerous

Table 5 - Strategies used to impress another person.

### "LOOKING-GLASS SELF"

The view that the self is only a reflection of the reactions of other people was first proposed by C.H. Cooley (1902). He coined the phrase "looking-glass self".



To understand what we are like, we need to see how others see us. This is most important in the primary groups of family, peers and neighbourhood community.

Cooley suggested three elements to the "looking-glass self":

- i) our thoughts about how we appear to others, which is based on what is said to us or we overhear;
- ii) our thoughts about how others are judging us. This ability to judge self on the basis of social standards emerges during childhood. This idea was developed by Mead (1934) with the concept of "generalised other";
- iii) our feelings of pride or shame as a result of (ii).

Guthrie (1938) quotes the case of a group of boys who all decided to ask an unattractive classmate out on dates. She soon changed her self image because of this attention, and became confident and attractive. The feedback of others is the crucial aspect of self perception for Cooley.

Other research shows how comparison with others is also important. Morse and Gergen (1970) set up the "Mr.Clean-Mr.Dirty" experiment. Participants were waiting for a job interview with either the perfect candidate ("Mr.Clean") or the worse possible candidate ("Mr.Dirty"). The self-esteem of participants varied based on who they were waiting with. With "Mr.Clean", their self-esteem went down, but increased with "Mr.Dirty".

## SELF-ESTEEM

Coopersmith (1968) defines self-esteem as "a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes the individual holds towards himself". The judgments we make about ourselves are also the product of others' views and reaction to us.

The most important factor in the development of self-esteem is the reaction of the parent(s). Coopersmith (1968) carried out a large scale study to show how this influenced the development of self-esteem of a group of schoolboys.

The study involved hundreds of 9-10 year olds in the London area. Firstly, a measure of their self-esteem was made based on a self-reported questionnaire, teachers' evaluations, and observation of the boys' self-confidence in new situations. The boys with the highest and lowest self-esteem were chosen to study in detail. The boys were

from similar backgrounds (white middle-class), similar intelligence, and had no emotional disturbances.

From the interviews with the boys, patterns of behaviour emerged (table 6).

HIGH SELF-ESTEEM

- confident
- expected to succeed
- doing well at school
- popular
- realistic view of self
- not fearful of criticism

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- isolated
- fearful
- reluctant to join in
- self-conscious
- oversensitive to criticism
- underachieving at school
- preoccupation with own problems

Table 6 - Differences between boys with high and low self-esteem.

Coopersmith then interviewed the boys' mothers in detail about child-rearing practices. The children with high self-esteem were treated as individuals, and given consistent punishment, with firm guidelines and control. Table 7 shows the differences in child-rearing between boys with high and low self-esteem.

HIGH SELF-ESTEEM

- high expectations, but supported to achieve them
- treated as individual
- reasoning given for punishment
- consistent and prompt punishment
- accepting of child

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- unclear expectations and little support
- not treated as individual
- autocratic and no explanation given for punishment
- inconsistent punishment
- inattentive of child

NO EQUIVALENTS

- parents high self-esteem
- parents emotional stability
- parents clear definition of authority

Table 7 - Differences in child-rearing between boys with high and low self-esteem.

But the study involved boys only, and from a particular social background.

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