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

Nonconscious Decision Making: Sleeping on It

Automaticity and Behavior

Automaticity and Emotions

Emotions: Things Will Never Get Better

Controlled Processing

The Impression Others Make on Us: How Do We “Read” People?

How Accurate Are Our Impressions?

Confidence and Impression Formation

If at First You Don’t Like Someone, You May Never Like Them

Person Perception: Reading Faces and Catching Liars

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

Intentionality and Attributions

Attribution Biases

Misattributions

The Fundamental Attribution Error

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

Assimilating New Information into a Schema

The Confirmation Bias

Shortcuts to Reality: Heuristics

The Availability Heuristic

The Representativeness Heuristic

Positive Psychology: Optimism, Cognition, Health, and Life

Optimism and Cognition

Optimism and Health

Optimism and Happiness
The Effects of Distressing and Joyful Events on Future Happiness

The Incompetent, the Inept: Are They Happy?

Cognitive Optimism: An Evolutionary Interpretation

Bottom Line

The *Vincennes* Revisited

Chapter Review

KEY TERMS

**Impression formation**: The process by which we make judgments about others. (p. 63)

**Controlled processing**: An effortful and careful processing of information that occurs when we are motivated to accurately assess information or if our initial impressions or expectations are disconfirmed. (p. 63)

**Automatic processing**: The idea that because of our limited information processing capacity, we construct social impressions without much thought or effort, especially when we lack the motivation for careful assessment or when our initial impressions are confirmed. (p. 63)

**Attribution**: The process of assigning causes of behavior, both your own and that of others. (p. 75)

**Internal attribution**: The process of assigning the cause of behavior to some internal characteristic rather than to outside forces. (p. 75)

**External attribution**: The process of assigning the cause of behavior to some situation or event outside a person’s control rather than to some internal characteristic. (p. 75)

**Correspondent inference**: An inference that occurs when we conclude that a person’s overt behavior is caused by or corresponds to the person’s internal characteristics or beliefs. (p. 75)

**Covariation principle**: The rule that if a response is present when a situation (person, object, or event) is present and absent when that same situation is absent, the situation is presumed to be the cause of the response. (p. 77)

**Cognitive miser**: The idea suggesting that because humans have a limited capacity to understand information, we deal only with small amounts of social information and prefer the least effortful means of processing it. (p. 77)

**Fundamental attribution error**: The tendency to automatically attribute the causes for another person’s behavior to internal rather than situational forces. (p. 81)

**Actor-observer bias**: An attribution bias showing that we prefer external attributions for our own behavior, especially if outcomes are negative, whereas observers tend to make internal attributions for the same behavior performed by others. (p. 83)

**False consensus bias**: The tendency to believe that our own feelings and behavior are shared by everyone else. (p. 84)
**Primacy effect:** The observation that information encountered early in the impression formation process plays a powerful role in our eventual impression of an individual. (p. 85)

**Belief perseverance:** The tendency for initial impressions to persist despite later conflicting information, accounting for much of the power of first impressions. (p. 85)

**Schema:** A set of organized cognitions that help us interpret, evaluate, and remember a wide range of social stimuli, including events, persons, and ourselves. (p. 85)

**Implicit personality theory:** A common person schema belief that certain personality traits are linked together and may help us make a quick impression of someone, but there is no guarantee that initial impression will be correct. (p. 85)

**Self-fulfilling prophecy:** A tendency to expect ourselves to behave in ways that lead to confirmation of our original expectation. (p. 86)

**Behavioral confirmation:** A tendency for perceivers to behave as if their expectations are correct and the targets then respond in ways that confirm the perceivers’ beliefs. (p. 86)

**Confirmation bias:** A tendency to engage in a search strategy that confirms rather than disconfirms our hypothesis. (p. 87)

**Heuristics:** Handy rules of thumb that serve as shortcuts to organizing and perceiving social reality. (p. 88)

**Availability heuristic:** A shortcut used to estimate the frequency or likelihood of an event based on how quickly examples of it come to mind. (p. 88)

**Representativeness heuristic:** A rule used to judge the probability of an event or a person falling into a category based on how representative it or the person is of the category. (p. 89)

**Counterfactual thinking:** The tendency to create positive alternatives to a negative outcome that actually occurred, especially when we can easily imagine a more positive outcome. (p. 89)

**Metacognition:** The way we think about thinking, which is primarily optimistic. (p. 90)

**Positive illusions:** Beliefs that include unrealistically optimistic notions about individuals’ ability to handle a threat and create a positive outcome. (p. 91)

**Sinister attribution error:** The tendency for certain people to over attribute lack of trustworthiness to others. (p. 95)

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

At the conclusion of Chapter 3, you should be able to:

1. Explain the differences between automatic and controlled processing, and describe the importance of automaticity in social perception, behavior and emotions.

You should be able to define and describe the process of impression formation. You should also 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). Additionally, you should be aware of the role of unconscious thought in social perception. You should also understand how automaticity relates to 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.

2. 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.

3. Discuss the process of reading whether others are lying to you.

You should be able to describe the neurophysiology of face perception and how we read faces for cues about truthfulness. 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.

4. 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).

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. Explain how high versus low consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency would lead people to make person or situational attributions.

You should be aware 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.

8. Describe dual process models of attribution and the role of intentionality in the attribution process.

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 will understand how we can adjust initial internal attributions as new information becomes available. You should appreciate that these models do not
replace earlier theories, but rather add to our understanding of attribution processes. Additionally, you should be able to describe how judgments of intentionality enter into the attribution process.

9. 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 misattributions are, what the actor-observer bias is, and the false-consensus bias.

10. Discuss how we form impressions of others.

You should be able to discuss the processes involved in forming impressions of others and be cognizant of the importance of first impressions. You should understand what a primacy effect is and how once we form a belief we are reluctant to abandon it (belief perseverance).

11. Describe the role of schemas and stories in processing social information.

You should gain an understanding of what a schema is, where they originate, and how they affect social perception. You will also come to understand how schemas contribute to individuals' tendencies to engage in using implicit personality theories and self-fulfilling prophecies. You will also learn how new information is incorporated into existing schemas and how existing schemas can be modified to account for new situations. You will be able to describe how schemas contribute to errors in judgment working through the confirmation bias. Finally, you will be able to describe the various types of heuristics we use and how they relate to the accuracy of social perception.

12. Talk about the newer area of positive psychology.

You will come to understand how our metacognition tends to be primarily positive and how that can cause us to be overoptimistic about our abilities. You will also discover how optimism relates to our health and how positive illusions help us cope with negative health issues. You will also be able to discuss how optimism relates to overall happiness and how experiencing both positive and negative events affects assessments of the future. Additionally, you will be able to discuss whether “incompetent” people are truly happy and how optimism fits in with an evolutionary perspective.

KEY QUESTIONS

These questions appear at the beginning of the chapter. As you read the text, answer these questions as a way to learn the material.

1. What is impression formation?
2. What are automatic and controlled processing?
3. What is meant by a cognitive miser?
4. What evidence is there for the importance of nonconscious decision making?
5. What is the effect of automaticity on behavior and emotions?
6. Are our impressions of others accurate?
7. What is the sample bias?
8. Can we catch liars?
9. What is the attribution process?
10. What are internal and external attributions?
11. What is the correspondent inference theory, and what factors enter into forming a correspondent inference?
12. What are covariation theory and the covariation principle?
13. How do consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information lead to an internal or external attribution?
14. What is the dual process model of attribution, and what does it tell us about the attribution process?
15. What is meant by attribution biases?
16. What is the fundamental attribution error?
17. What is the actor-observer bias?
18. What is the false consensus bias?
19. What is the importance of first impressions?
20. What are schemas, and what role do they play in social cognition?
21. What is the self-fulfilling prophecy, and how does it relate to behavior?
22. What are the various types of heuristics that often guide social cognition?
23. What is meant by metacognition?
24. How do optimism and pessimism relate to social cognition and behavior?
25. How do distressing events affect happiness?
26. What does evolution have to do with optimistic biases?

PRACTICE TESTS

Multiple-Choice

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

1. According to your text, the process of making judgments about others is called
   a. metacognition.
   b. attribution.
   c. impression formation.
   d. impression management.

2. When we form social impressions 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. the behavior of others.
   d. nonconscious, automatic processing.
   e. both a and b above

5. According one good way to deal with a particularly difficult problem is to
   a. keep thinking about it until you figure out a solution.
   b. avoid using cognitive shortcuts.
   c. make use of nonconscious processing and just “sleep on it”.
   d. rely on others for a solution.

6. According to unconscious thought theory,
   a. conscious thought has an almost unlimited capacity to help us solve problems.
   b. conscious thought has a limited capacity for handling information and thus may not always work for complex problems.
   c. unconscious thought is too error prone for us to rely on when solving problems.
7. According to your text, people are most accurate in predicting the state of a relationship in the future when they relied on
   a. gut feelings.
   b. careful consideration of the relationship via introspection.
   c. controlled processing.
   d. implicit personality theories.

8. The nonconscious activation of social knowledge is known as
   a. automatic activation.
   b. unconscious activation.
   c. pumping.
   d. priming.

9. Research evidence suggests that our emotions are
   a. usually accurate and appropriate to the situation.
   b. under conscious control.
   c. under automatic control.
   d. none of the above

10. 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

11. 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

12. According to your text, confidence in the accuracy in detecting deception is
    a. positively related to actual accuracy.
    b. negatively related to actual accuracy.
    c. both positively and negatively related to actual accuracy, depending on the situation.
    d. not significantly related to actual accuracy.

13. 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.
    d. none of the above

14. 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 an
    a. external attribution.
    b. internal attribution.
    c. inward attribution.
    d. extrinsic attribution.
15. An ________________ is when you attribute a behavior to something about the situation.
   a. external attribution
   b. internal attribution
   c. inward attribution
   d. intrinsic attribution

16. 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

17. 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 consistency, and high distinctiveness.

18. 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

19. According to the dual process model of attributions, your initial attribution is based on ________ processing; and the later adjustment is based on ________ processing.
   a. automatic; controlled
   b. controlled; automatic
   c. controlled; controlled
   d. automatic; automatic

20. Which of the following was NOT one of the four dimensions underlying common notions of intentionality?
   a. desire
   b. awareness
   c. controllability
   d. belief

21. 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.

22. 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.
23. 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 credit for something you actually had nothing to do with.
   d. you tend to ignore consensus information when making attributions.

24. 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

25. ________________ 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 tenacity
   d. Belief perseverance
   e. none of the above

26. 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

27. Jacob’s teacher believes he is really smart. Jacob ends up with the highest grades in the class. This is an example of the
   a. fundamental attribution error.
   b. self-fulfilling prophecy.
   c. false-consensus bias.
   d. actor-observer bias.

28. When you seek out information that supports a belief that you have, rather than information that does not support your belief, you are experiencing the
   a. confirmation bias.
   b. disconfirmation bias.
   c. belief perseverance effect.
   d. false-consensus bias.

29. 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.
30. Beliefs that include unrealistically optimistic notions about individuals' ability to handle a threat are known as
   a. optimistic illusions.
   b. self-enhancing illusions.
   c. positive illusions.
   d. negative illusions.

**Fill-in-the-Blank**

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

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

33. Recent research suggests that the best way to deal with complex problems is to rely on ___________________.

34. According to your text, nonconscious phenomena such as the "cocktail party effect" can be explained as being a result of _________________.

35. According to your text, your ability to accurately read others depends on your ___________________.

36. According to your text, the cues that may give away a liar depend on ___________________.

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

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

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

40. 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.

41. 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."

42. The ___________________ model of attribution suggests that we make an adjustment to an automatic initial attribution.

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

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

45. 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 ___________________.

46. The ___________________ is the tendency to believe that our own feelings and behavior are
shared by everyone else.

47. A ______________________ is the observation that earliest information plays a powerful role in our eventual impression of an individual.

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

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

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

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

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

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

54. The way we think about thinking is known as ______________________.

55. _________________ involve overoptimistic one's ability to handle stressful situations.

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.

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
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 attribution style and the state of the relationship.

**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 partner's?

**INTERNET ACTIVITY**

**What is Your Locus of Control?**
In chapter 3, attribution theory was discussed. Recall that one can make an internal or external attribution about behavior (our own and others). Certain individuals are more predisposed than others to make either internal or external attributions. This is known as **locus of control**. An individual with an internal locus of control tends to attribute behavior internally, whereas an individual with an external locus of control tends to attribute behavior externally. You can determine where you are in this dimension by taking an on-line locus of control test. One test can be found at [http://www.queendom.com/tests/lc.html](http://www.queendom.com/tests/lc.html). You can find this test or others by entering the search term "attribution style" into a search engine.

Once you have found a locus of control site, take the test and obtain your results. Then answer the following questions:

1. Where did you score on the main locus of control dimension?
2. Do you think that the test gave an accurate picture of your locus of control?
3. Where did you score on subscales (e.g., attribution about success or failure)?
4. Did the Web site give any advice about your attribution style? If so, what was it?
5. How useful do you think the advice given is?