

Chapter 2

Social Learning and Social Cognition

INTRODUCTION

Social cognition is the mental activity that relates to social activities, and which helps us meet the goal of understanding and predicting the behavior of ourselves and others. A fundamental part of social cognition involves **learning** – the relatively permanent change in knowledge that is acquired through experience.

The errors we make frequently occur because of our reliance on our schemas and attitudes and a general tendency to take shortcuts through the use of **cognitive heuristics**: information-processing rules of thumb that enable us to think in ways that are quick and easy but that may sometimes lead to error.

1. SOURCES OF SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

- Review the principles of operant, associational and observational learning and explain the similarities and differences among them.
- Explain how and when schemas and attitudes do and do not change as a result of the operation of accommodation and assimilation.
- Outline the ways that schemas are likely to be maintained through processes that create assimilation

Section Outline

- People have many memories about their experiences with other people, and use this information to make predictions about what people will do in the future; this is a result of learning.
- **Operant (instrumental) learning** is the principle that we learn new information as a result of the consequences of our behavior.
- **Associational learning** occurs when an object or event comes to be associated with a natural response, such as an automatic behavior or a positive or negative emotion.
 - It influences our knowledge about and our judgments of other people.
 - We react positively to people we associate with positive things.
 - We react negatively to people associated with negative things.
- **Observational learning** or **modeling** occurs when people learn by observing the behavior of others.
 - Observational learning allows people to learn without having to actually engage in what might be a risky behavior.
 - Research by Albert Bandura shows that children learn ways of aggressive behavior by observing others.
 - It is involved in much of our learning about our social worlds.
- Our schemas and our attitudes contain our knowledge and future expectations of the world around us.
 - They allow us to better understand people and make sense of information.
 - They influence our subsequent learning.
- When existing schemas change on the basis of new information, it is called **accommodation**.
- When existing knowledge influences new conflicting information to better fit with our existing knowledge the process is called **assimilation**.

- People are more likely to assimilate than accommodate information because once a schema is developed it is difficult to make changes.
- Our beliefs are hard to change.
 - A research study conducted by Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard (1975) showed that people tend to assimilate information even when they receive new information that is contradictory. The tendency for people to favor information that confirms their expectations, regardless of whether the information is true is called **confirmation bias**.
 - Sometimes we accommodate new information because we want it to match our expectations.
 - Information that confirms our expectations is more likely to be processed.
 - Sometimes this leads to a **self-fulfilling prophecy** – a process when our expectations about others lead us to behave toward those others in ways that make those expectations come true.
 - Assimilation is one of the causes of inaccuracy of eyewitness testimony.

Exercises

1. Describe a time when you learned new information or new behavior through operant, associational, observational learning.
 Answer: Student answers will vary.
 Operant learning states that experiences that are followed by positive emotions are likely to be repeated; experiences that are followed by negative emotions are less likely to be repeated. Students need to recall a time (i) when they repeated an activity because they were praised/rewarded for it (ii) when they resisted an activity because they had been punished for it.
 Associational learning occurs when an object or event comes to be associated with a natural response, such as an automatic behavior or a positive or negative emotion. Students need to recall a time (i) when they reacted positively to someone whom they considered attractive (2) when they reacted negatively to someone whom they considered unattractive.
 Observational learning comes from the observing the behavior of other people. Students need to recall a time when they imitated the behavior of someone else without any knowledge of the context or situation.
2. Think about a time when you made a snap judgment about another person. Did your expectations about people influence your judgments of this person? Was the judgment fair or unfair?
 Answer: Students answers will vary.
 The students need to recall a time when they did not have any knowledge about a particular person but quickly made a judgment about his/her personality. They need to ask themselves why they made judgment and whether they were correct or incorrect in their assessment.
3. Consider some of your beliefs about the people you know. Do you think that your behaviors toward them lead you to maintain your expectations about them?
 Answer: Students answers will vary.
 Students need to think about (i) a person they have a favorable opinion about (ii) a person they have an unfavorable opinion about. They need to ask themselves why they feel the way do; and whether their opinion is based on the person's actual behavior or their perception of them.
4. Describe a time when you might have unfairly used an expectation about another person. Did the expectation serve as an energy saver?
 Answer: Student answers will vary.

Our learning is stored as knowledge in schemas. Our schemas allow us to better understand people sometimes make guesses about how they will react in a situation. Students are required to think about a time when they tried to guess how a person would react to a particular situation and used this to their advantage. They need to think if they were right in their expectation and whether it worked for their benefit.

Additional Exercises

1. Think of a person that you do not know well. Interact with this person over the next 15 days. What was your initial impression of the person? Has this opinion changed?
Answer: Students answers will vary.
Students need to interact with a person in the class, whom they are not well acquainted with. They need to record these interactions and at the end of the 15 days, need to observe how they both behaved and what helped them to form an opinion of each other.

2. HOW WE USE OUR EXPECTATIONS

- Provide examples of how salience and accessibility influence information processing
- Review, differentiate, and give examples of the cognitive heuristics that influence social judgment.

Section Outline

- Once we have developed a set of schemas and attitudes, we naturally use that information to help us judge and respond to others. Refer to Table 2.1: How Expectations Influence our Social Cognition.
- **Automatic cognition** refers to thinking that occurs out of our awareness, quickly and without taking much effort.
 - Things that we do most frequently tend to become more automatic each time we do them.
 - It occurs outside of our conscious awareness.
- When we deliberately size up and think about something – we call it **thoughtful (or controlled) cognition**.
- **Priming** is the technique in which information is temporarily brought into memory through exposure to situational events.
 - Bargh, Chen & Burrows (1996) found a relation between automatic cognition and priming.
- We are likely to judge people based on characteristics that are **salient** – those that attract our attention when we see someone or something.
 - People ignore more important but less salient information over information which is less important but relatively more salient.
 - Information which occurs across a large population is called **base rates**.
- We also base our judgments on things that represent or match our expectations; this is called **representativeness heuristic**.
 - When a schema is accessible, we are likely to use it to make judgments of ourselves and others.
 - Accessibility is often influenced by situational factors.
- **Cognitive accessibility** refers to the extent to which knowledge is activated in memory, and thus likely to be used in information processing.
- **Processing fluency** refers to the ease with which we can process information in our environments.

- The tendency to make judgments of the frequency or likelihood that an event occurs on the basis of the ease with which they can be retrieved from memory is known as the **availability heuristic**.
- **False consensus bias** is the tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people are similar to us.
 - Our own beliefs influence our perceptions of others.
 - We also tend to view ourselves more positively than the average person.
- **Counterfactual thinking** leads us to think of situations in terms of “what might have been”.
 - If a situation is better than we had expected, we are happier.
 - Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich (1995) in their research showed that bronze medalists are, on average, happier than silver medalists.
- **Anchoring and adjustment** leads us to accept ideas that we should revise.
- Another potential bias in perception comes from overconfidence in our own abilities.
 - Many people have been wrongfully convicted on the basis of inaccurate eyewitness testimony given by overconfident witnesses.
- Research shows that people who should know better – and who need to know better, are also subject to cognitive biases.
 - Economists, stock traders, managers, lawyers, and even doctors make the same mistakes in their professional activities that people make in their everyday lives.
- Although biases are common, they are not impossible to control.
 - Better feedback on decisions can improve bias.
- Cognitive processes become important in areas of social importance such as eyewitness testimony.
 - Crimes occur quickly in situations of great stress and that leads to inaccurate coding of information.
 - People may be particularly inaccurate when they are asked to identify members of a race other than their own.
 - Another setting in which eyewitnesses may be inaccurate is when they try to identify suspects from mugshots or lineups.

Exercises

1. Given an example of a time when you may have committed one of the cognitive errors listed in Table 2.1. What was the outcome of your use of the shortcut or heuristic?
 Answer: Students answers will vary with the cognitive errors they choose. Students are required to refer to Table 2.1: How expectations influence social cognition and find any one error that they have committed.
 Automatic cognition refers to thinking that occurs out of our awareness, quickly and without taking much effort. When we deliberately size up and think about something – we call it thoughtful (or controlled) cognition.
2. Go to the website <http://thethothand.blogspot.com>, which analyzes the extent to which people accurately perceive “streakiness” in sports. Consider how our sports perceptions are influenced by our expectations and the use of cognitive heuristics.
 Answer: Students answers will vary.
 “Streakiness” in sports depends on the expectations people have from their favorite teams. For example, Dallas Mavericks’ fans would expect their team to perform well this season because they won the previous one. Similarly, cognitive heuristics can influence a team’s performance. For example, a Colorado Rockies’ fan may think that the team will win the match in Denver because it won the last 5 matches played at its home ground.

Additional Exercises

1. Think of a situation where the problem of anchoring and adjustment has biased your decision.
Answer: Students answers will vary.
Anchoring and adjustment leads us to accept ideas that we should revise. Students need to think of a situation where knowledge of a particular aspect from people who are close to them has prevented them from doing things which, otherwise, they would have done.