

Principles of Social Psychology, V2.0

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CHAPTER 2

Social Learning and Social Cognition



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 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.
- Provide examples of how salience and accessibility influence information processing.
- Review, differentiate, and give examples of the cognitive heuristics that influence social judgment.
- Summarize and give examples of the importance of social cognition in everyday life.



INTRODUCTION

- **Social cognition:** 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
- **Learning:** the relatively permanent change in knowledge that is acquired through experience
- **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



SOURCES OF SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE: A RESULT OF LEARNING

- **Conditioning:** the ability to connect stimuli (the changes that occur in the learning environment) with responses (behaviors or other actions)



OPERANT LEARNING

- **Operant (Instrumental) learning:** we learn new information as a result of the consequences of our behavior
 - Experiences that are followed by negative emotions (punishments) are less likely to be repeated



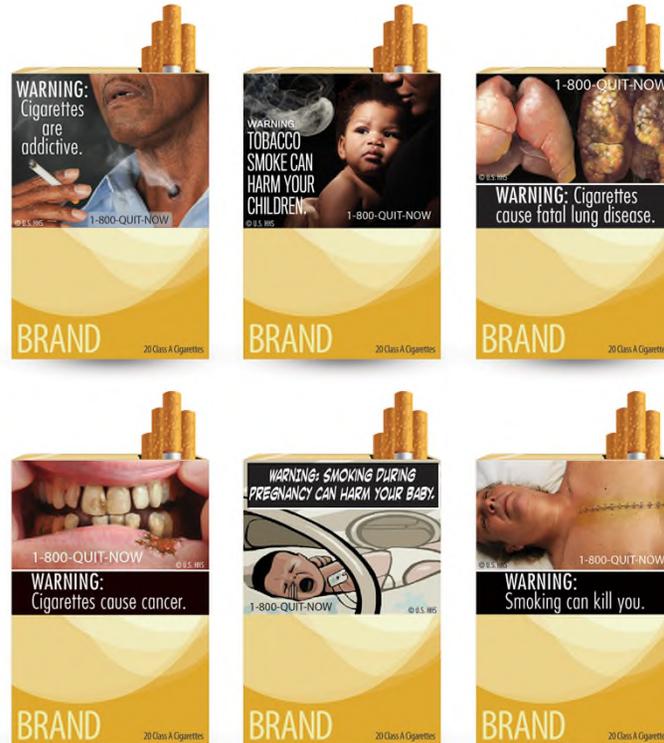
ASSOCIATIONAL LEARNING

- **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
 - Influences our knowledge about and our judgments of other people
 - We have positive feelings toward the people we associate with positive things
 - Negatives:
 - We may dislike people from certain racial or ethnic groups because we frequently see them portrayed in the media as associated with violence, drug use, or terrorism
 - We may avoid people with certain physical characteristics simply because they remind us of other people we know that we do not like



EXAMPLE OF ASSOCIATIONAL LEARNING

- The goal of these images is to associate the fear of dying with cigarette smoking.





OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING (MODELING)

- **Observational learning (modeling):** learning that occurs through exposure to the behavior of others
 - It's involved in much of our learning about our social worlds
 - Observational learning is useful because it allows people to learn without having to actually engage in what might be a risky behavior
- **Bandura's research on observational learning:**
 - Observational learning as a fundamental determinant of all social behavior
 - Not all behaviors are modeled equally
 - How we learn is influenced by the type of behavior, the people performing the behavior, and our understanding of the observed behavior
 - Modeling is most likely when people pay attention to the behavior of models and are motivated to imitate them



SCHEMAS AS SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

- Our schemas and our attitudes contain our knowledge and our evaluations of the world around us
- They reside primarily in the *prefrontal cortex*
 - **Prefrontal cortex:** the part of the brain that lies in front of the motor areas of the cortex, and helps us remember the characteristics and actions of people, plan complex social behaviors, and coordinate our behaviors with those of others



HOW SCHEMAS DEVELOP

- Because they represent our past experience, and because past experience is useful for prediction, our schemas and attitudes serve as expectations about future events
- Having a database of social knowledge to draw on is extremely useful
- Our schemas and our attitudes allow us to better understand people, and help us make sense of information, particularly when the information is unclear or ambiguous



ACCOMMODATION AND ASSIMILATION

- Different people have different past experiences - their schemas and attitudes are different
 - Helps explain why different people draw different conclusions about the same events
 - Our schemas and attitudes influence our subsequent learning
- **Accommodation:** when existing schemas change on the basis of new information
- **Assimilation:** a process in which our existing knowledge influences new conflicting information to better fit with our existing knowledge, thus reducing the likelihood of schema change



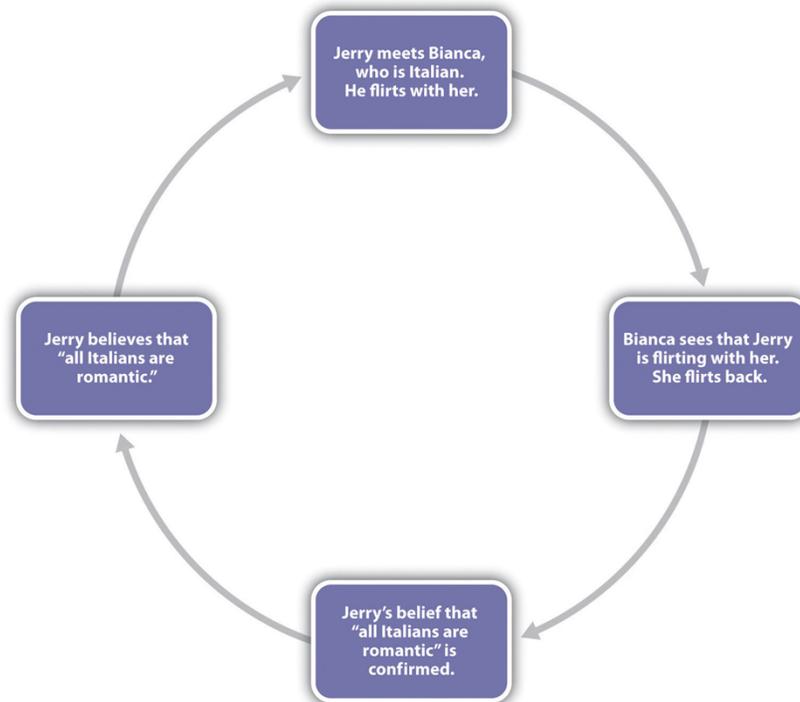
HOW SCHEMAS MAINTAIN THEMSELVES: THE POWER OF ASSIMILATION

- The tendency toward assimilation is so strong that it can often cause *confirmation bias*
 - **Confirmation bias:** the tendency for people to favor information that confirms their expectations, regardless of whether the information is true
- Expectations influence:
 - What we attend to
 - What we remember
- One frequent outcome is that information that confirms our expectations is more easily processed, and more easily understood, and thus has a bigger impact, than does information that disconfirms our expectations
- However, we do not only remember information that matches our expectations
 - We encounter and remember information that is extreme and conflicting with our expectations



SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

- **Self-fulfilling prophecy:** a process that occurs when our expectations about others lead us to behave toward those others in ways that make those expectations come true





AUTOMATIC VERSUS CONTROLLED COGNITION

- **Automatic cognition:** thinking that occurs out of our awareness, quickly and without taking much effort
 - Examples: riding a bike, operating a TV remote control
 - Judgements about others (especially people we don't know well) become automatic
- **Thoughtful (Controlled) cognition:** when we deliberately size up and think about something
 - We frequently rely on automatic cognition, because thoughtful cognition takes a lot of effort and time
 - **Priming:** a technique in which information is temporarily brought into memory through exposure to situational events



SALIENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY DETERMINE WHICH EXPECTATIONS WE USE

- **Salient:** characteristics that attract our attention when we see something or someone with them
 - Example: things that are unusual, negative, colorful, bright, or moving
- We are more likely to judge based on sex, race, age, and physical attractiveness in part because these features are so salient when we see them
- Another thing that makes something particularly salient is its infrequency or unusualness
- The salience of the stimuli in our social worlds may sometimes lead us to make judgements on the basis of information that is actually less informative than is other less salient information

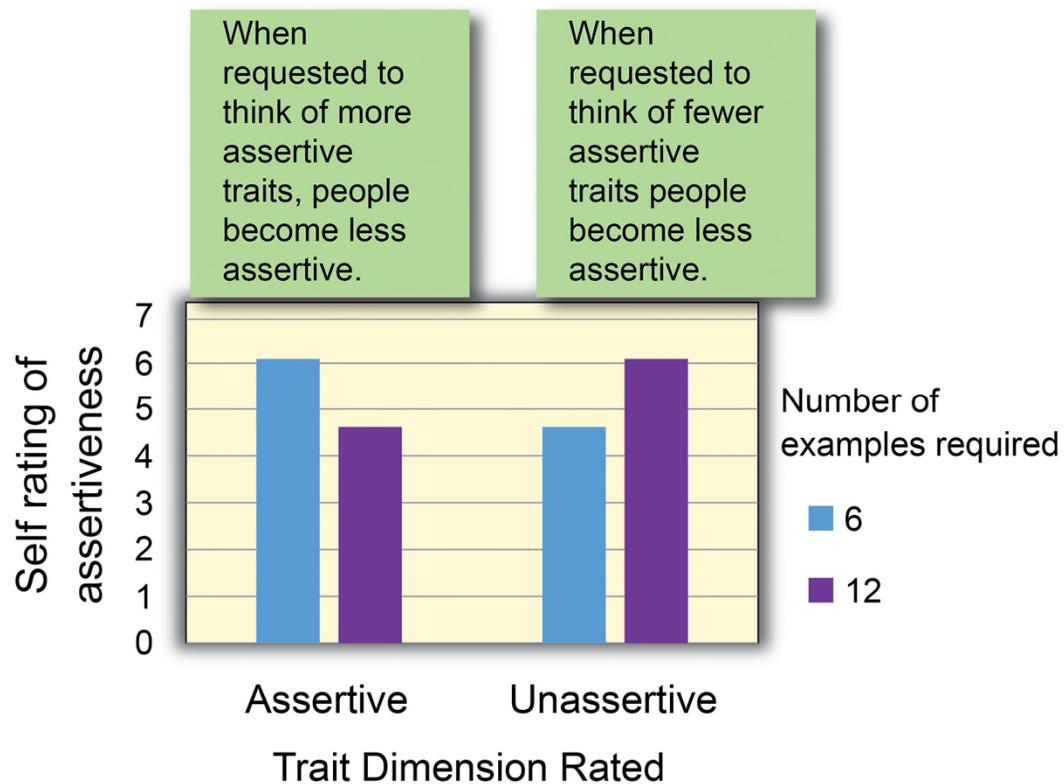


SALIENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY DETERMINE WHICH EXPECTATIONS WE USE (CONTINUED)

- **Base rates:** the likelihood that events occur across a large population
- **Representativeness heuristic:** the tendency to base our judgments on information that seems to represent, or match, what we expect will happen while ignoring more informative base-rate information
- **Cognitive accessibility:** the extent to which an attitude or schema is activated in memory and thus likely to be used in information processing
- **Availability heuristic:** the tendency to make judgments of the frequency or likelihood that an event occurs on the basis of the ease with which examples of the event can be retrieved from memory
- **Processing fluency:** the ease with which we can process information in our environments



FIGURE 2.5 PROCESSING FLUENCY





THE FALSE CONSENSUS BIAS

- **False consensus bias:** the tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people are similar to us
 - It is not usually observed on judgments of positive personal traits that we highly value as important



COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

- **Counterfactual thinking:** the tendency to think about events according to “what might have been”
 - The accessibility of the potential alternative outcome leads to some very paradoxical effects
 - If we can easily imagine an outcome that is better than what actually happened, then we may experience sadness and disappointment
 - If we can easily imagine that a result might have been worse than what actually happened, we may be more likely to experience happiness and satisfaction



ANCHORING AND ADJUSTMENT

- **Anchoring and adjustment:** the tendency to weight an initial construct too heavily, insufficiently moving our judgment away from it

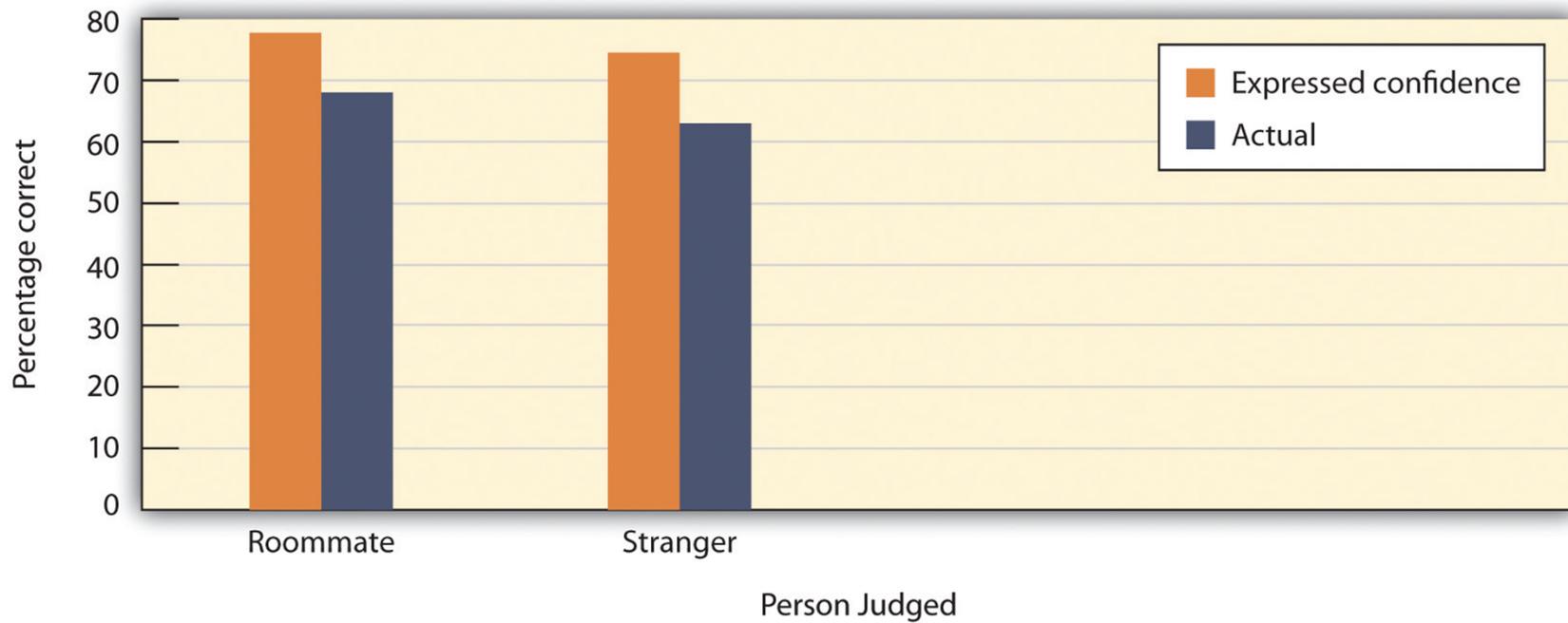


OVERCONFIDENCE

- Being overconfident in our own skills, abilities, and judgements has powerful and negative effects on our judgments



FIGURE 2.6 OVERCONFIDENCE





THE IMPORTANCE OF COGNITIVE BIASES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

- If the errors occur for a lot of people, they can really add up
- People may take more care to prepare for unlikely events than for more likely ones, because the unlikely ones are more salient or accessible
- Salience and accessibility also color how we perceive our social worlds, which may have a big influence on our behavior
- Biases are not impossible to control, and psychologists and other scientists are working to help people make better decisions



TABLE 2.2 COGNITIVE ERRORS

Cognitive Process	Description	Example
Representativeness heuristic	We tend to make judgments according to how well the event matches our expectations.	After a coin has come up heads many times in a row, we may erroneously think that the next flip is more likely to be tails.
Availability heuristic	Things that come to mind easily tend to be seen as more common.	We may overestimate the crime statistics in our own area because these crimes are so easy to recall.
Anchoring and adjustment	Although we try to adjust our judgments away from them, our decisions are overly based on the things that are most highly accessible in memory.	We may buy more of a product when it is advertised in bulk than when it is advertised as a single item.
Counterfactual thinking	We may “replay” events such that they turn out differently—especially when only minor changes in the events leading up to them make a difference.	We may feel particularly bad about events that might not have occurred if only a small change might have prevented them.
False consensus bias	We tend to see other people as similar to us.	We are surprised when other people have different political opinions or values.
Overconfidence	We tend to have more confidence in our skills, abilities, and judgments than is objectively warranted.	Eyewitnesses are often extremely confident that their identifications are accurate, even when they are not.