

PSY2042 – SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

TOPIC 1 – INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

What is social psychology?

- **Social psychology:** the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others.
- **Social influence:** the effect that the words, actions, or mere presence of other people have on our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviour.

The power of the situation

- **Fundamental attribution error (FAE):** the tendency to explain our own and other people's behaviour entirely in terms of personality traits.
 - o Underestimating the power of social influence.
 - When we underestimate the power of social influence, we gain a feeling of false security.
 - Increases personal vulnerability to possibly destructive social influence.
 - Lulls us into lowering our guard.
 - By doing so, we tend to:
 - Oversimplify complex situations.
 - Decrease our understanding the true causes.
 - Blame the victim when people are overpowered by social forces.

The social cognition motive

- **Social cognition motive:** takes into account how people think about the world.
 - o We try to gain accurate understandings so we can make effective judgements and decisions.
 - o But we typically act on the basis of incompletely and inaccurately interpreted information.
- The social cognition perspective views people as 'amateur sleuths' doing their best to understand and predict their social world.

What is social cognition?

- **Social cognition:** how people think about themselves and the social world; more specifically, how people select, interpret, remember, and use social information to make judgements and decisions.
- Two types:
 - o **Automatic thinking:** thought that is unconscious, unintentional, involuntary, and effortless.
 - People use schemas for automatic thinking.
 - Types of automatic thinking:
 - Automatic goal pursuit – it is our nonconscious minds that choose the goals for us, basing a decision in part on which goal has been recently activated or primed.

- Automatic decision making – period of distraction helps make the best choice.
 - First, have a conscious goal to make a good choice.
 - Second, conscious thought is superior when the decision required a series of simple rules
- Automatic thinking and metaphors about the body and mind (e.g. smelling something clean → more trusting strangers): priming metaphors about the relationship between the mind and the body.
- Mental strategies and shortcuts: judgmental heuristics (i.e. mental shortcuts people use to make judgments quickly and efficiently; e.g. availability heuristic and representativeness heuristic). People often use base rate information.
- **Controlled thinking:** thought that is conscious, intentional, voluntary and effortful.
 - Sometimes we over or under estimate out control. The more people believe in free will, the more they help and the less they cheat.
 - Mentally undoing the past: counterfactual reasoning (i.e. mentally changing some aspect of the past as a way of imagining what might have been).
 - The easier to mentally undo an outcome, the stronger the emotional reaction (e.g. death of a family member, silver medal, rumination can lead to depression).

How do we form an impression of others?

- Asch (1946) found that people described with these two sets of traits (warm/cold) were perceived very different – the ‘warm’ person very positively and the ‘cold’ person very negatively.
- This approach is known as the **configural model**:
 - The cold and warm traits have a strong effect on the interpretation of the surrounding traits.
 - These are terms CENTRAL traits because of their influence.
 - Other traits do not have the same power: polite/blunt.
 - Traits which approach first have more impact on final impression (primacy effect).

Stereotypes

- **Stereotype:** a cluster of characteristics that are attributed to members of specific social group or category.
- Attributing a stereotype cause for an outcome or event can blind us to the true causes of events.
- They are hard to change once they are formed.
 - We see what we expect to see.
 - We discount information that contradicts a stereotype.

Social schemas

- **Schemas:** mental structures people use to organise their knowledge about the social world around themes or subjects.

- Influences the information people notice, think about, and remember.
- Schemas organise what we know and help interpret new situations.
- Allow top-down processing.
- Types of schemas:
 - o Person schema.
 - o Role schema.
 - o Script (rules).
 - o Content free schema.
 - o Self-schema.

Which schemas do we use? Accessibility and priming

- **Accessibility:** extent to which schemas and concepts are at the forefront of people's minds and then likely to be used when making judgements about the social world.
- Schemas can become accessible for three reasons:
 - o Past experience – constantly active and ready to use to interpret ambiguous situations.
 - **Ambiguous:** interpretable in either a positive or negative way.
 - o Goal.
 - o Recent experiences – primed by something people have been thinking or doing before encountering an event.
- Thoughts have to be both accessible and applicable before they will act as **primes**, exerting an influence on our impressions of the social world.
- **Priming:** the process by which recent experiences increase the accessibility of a schema, trait or concept.
 - o Good example of automatic thinking because it occurs quickly, unintentionally and unconsciously.

Making our schemas come true: The self-fulfilling prophecy

- **Self-fulfilling prophecy:** expectation about what another person is like → influences how they act towards that person → person to behave consistently with people's original expectations → expectations to come true.
- Example of automatic thinking.

Mental strategies and shortcuts: Heuristics

- Often apply our previous knowledge and schemas. However, there may be no existing schemas or there are too many schemas that could apply.
 - o We then use judgemental heuristics:
 - **Judgemental heuristics:** mental shortcuts people use to make judgements quickly and efficiently.
 - Can be inadequate for the job at hand or misapplied, leading to faulty judgements.
- **Availability heuristic:** a mental rule of thumb whereby people base a judgement on the ease with which they can bring something to mind.
 - o Easiest to remember → may not be accurate overall picture.
- **Representative heuristic:** classify something according to a stereotype.
 - o **Base-rate information:** information about the frequency of members of different categories in the population.