Essay Question 1 – September 14, 2015

Chapter 2 is all about Social Cognition: the mental schemes and shortcuts we take to understand our social world.

Last year, a major news event took place when Officer Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri, shot and killed an unarmed African American teen, Michael Brown.

How can you use the ideas of Social Cognition to better understand what happened, during the altercation between Officer Wilson and afterwards?

Best answers use a variety of Social Cognition theories or ideas, and apply them to multiple points of view (Officer Wilson's, Michael Brown, the general public, etc.)

It is easier for me to read and evaluate your essay if you cut and paste into the Sakai site; however, if Sakai doesn't allow you to do that easily, or it takes too much space, just provide an attachment.

Psychologists have studied Social Cognition (the way we think in social situations) from many different perspectives and some of their results can be applied to recent cases, such as the murder of an unarmed black teenaged, Michael Brown. Michael Brown's death is not rare. Black people are killed by police nearly every single day. His case, however, is quite unique in that it became viral on social media and corporate news and is considered the birth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement—a movement addressing and reforming the disproportionate murders and use of excessive force by police officers on black people. Theories on social cognition can help explain the situation from different perspectives, such as officer Darren Wilson, American teenager Michael Brown, corporate news, and the general public.

From Darren Wilson’s perspective, Brown was black and therefore fit with pre-existing schema of black men as dangerous, and so he quickly reacted to a threat that actually did not exist. Schemas allow us to make "guesses about what other people are probably like or probably going to do in cases where things are uncertain" (59). When Officer Wilson saw Michael Brown and his friend in the street, he responded to the situation aggressively based on the appearance that these two men were black. We are more likely to judge a person by their race than their religion or political views, because race is very apparent (Brewer, 1988) (70). African American and Native American are the two least common “races” in The United States and yet represent the highest race killed by the police. Cognitive accessibility refers to “the extent to which a schema is activated in memory and thus likely to be used in information processing” (73). When an officer does not live or participate in the community they patrol, the schemas that are accessible to them may not apply to the situations they find themselves in. When a police department has a bad relationship with the community, memories of tension will be most accessible to both officers and citizens. Studies show that effective self-regulation is important in succeeding in life (Ayduk et al., 2000; Eigsti et al., 2006; Mischel, Ayduk, & Mendoza-Denton, 2003) (95). Maybe Wilson had poor self-regulation skills. Perhaps Wilson thought he was incapable of resolving the situation without lethal weapons, in which case he would have low self-efficacy—the belief that his actions will produce the desired result (96). Additionally, “use of cognitive heuristics is increased” for police under time pressure (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983) or when they feel threatened” (Kassam, Koslov, & Mendes, 2009) (80).
As with all eye-witness testimonies, Wilson’s testimonies of the murder may be skewed by moon-dependent memory, where we “better remember information when our current mood matches the mood we were in when we encoded that information” (92). Wilson would have been in a very different mood during the encounter with Brown versus after the charges were dropped. Darren Wilson had been an officer for 5 years and was friends with the city mayor and other powerful employees of the Court (Twitter, image). He was serving as a police officer when Henry Davis (an innocent unarmed black man) was charged with destruction of property for bleeding on the uniforms of police officers who beat him up (National Public Radio). Operant learning is when an individual learns to increase behaviors that are rewarded and decrease behaviors that are punished (55). Wilson saw officers NOT being punished for assaulting black people and he watched these same officers be rewarded with paid administrative leave and GoFundMe donations. Across the country, police officers continue to kill unarmed black people because they have learned through operant learning that they will not be punished for their actions (Akers, 1998) (56). Meanwhile, black people have learned to strongly associate police officers with murderers of people who share their skin color. Because of associative learning, black people behave differently towards the police than white people in similar circumstances would. While white people associate the police with security and protection, black people associate the police with violence and disrespect.

The response from the general public can be explained by theories in social cognition. With relation to police brutality, the general public is white people who trust the police and assume they are well-intentional in cases of murder. Some might say that Officer Wilson experienced “automatic cognition” when he thoughtlessly and effortlessly shot Michael Brown. However, automatic cognition usually occurs for actions that are performed very frequently. This was not automatic cognition. People frequently ignore base rates (the likelihood that events occur across a large population) and focus on non-statistical, personal accounts instead. We often use the representativeness heuristic, which “occurs when we base our judgments on information that seems to represent, or match, what we expect will happen, while ignoring more informative base-rate information” (72). We tend to let stereotypes flourish. Though police brutality ignites negative emotions, “cognitive reappraisal involves altering an emotional state by reinterpreting the meaning of the triggering situation or stimulus” (93). Perhaps people did not want to be sad and scared by Brown’s murder so they reinterpreted the situation as necessary. White people don’t want to accept that police officers are criminals. The media perpetuates this lesson, which is why white people “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” (57). Lewiki’s study (1985) of high school students shows the strong effect of impressions and how we judge people based on their associates (57). In the process of assimilation, one can take information that contradicts their pre-existing schema and make that information work in that schema. In contrast, one can accommodate the contradicting info by changing the schema. “One outcome of assimilation is the confirmation bias, the tendency for people to seek out and favor information that confirms their expectations and beliefs” (61). The results of a research study conducted by Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) show how strongly we stick to our beliefs, regardless of information that disproves them. One reason we rarely change our beliefs is because we come up with ways to confirm them. When information confirms our beliefs, we think that information is valid and credible and when
that information does not confirm our beliefs, we ignore it based off incredibility (Stanovich, West, & Toplak, 2013) (62). A study by Peter Wason (1960) shows that people rarely “think outside of the box” (62). “There is substantial research evidence indicating that when processing information about social groups, individuals tend to remember information better that confirms their existing beliefs about those groups” (Fyock & Stangor, 1994; Van Knippenberg & Dijksterhuis, 1996) (63). We “have a reconstructive memory bias, as we often remember things that match our current beliefs better than those that don’t and reshape those memories to better align with our current beliefs (Hilsabeck, Gouvier, & Bolter, 1998)” (63).

The media played a huge role in the perception of Michael Brown’s murder. Framing effects “occur when people’s judgments about different options are affected by whether they are framed as resulting in gains or losses” (93). In many ways, the general public had a choice to sympathize with Michael Brown and his family or with Darren Wilson and his family. With Wilson, the frame by the media was pity and that he was scared and helpless and being targeted unfairly. With Brown, the frame by the media was “too late” and that Brown didn’t really deserve pity.

Well-intending Americans who are not desperately fighting to end police brutality must have an optimistic bias that the issue will just get better in the future. Some people think we shouldn’t discuss police brutality because it is too sad and negative. The general public often attributes their negativity towards police brutality as negativity towards people talking about police brutality. “Misattribution of arousal occurs when people incorrectly label the source of the arousal that they are experiencing” (93). The risks of continuing letting officers off-the-hook are high. As seen in Bandura’s Bobo Doll study, “children learned new types of aggressive behaviors simply by observing and imitating others” (58). If officers are punished for an action, fellow officers will be less likely to perform the punished action.

Works Cited

http://www.npr.org/2014/09/12/348010247/in-ferguson-mo-before-michael-brown-there-was-henry-davis

(#) = Textbook

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