Part II: Social Cognition

The Frailties of Social Cognition

By

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Introduction

Social cognition is concerned with how we think about our social worlds. Unfortunately, much of this thinking is prone to error. These errors lead to interpersonal conflicts on the personal level, and international conflicts at the macro level.

Sources of Social Knowledge

Social knowledge, like all knowledge, is learned, and occurs through a variety of processes or mechanisms (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014).

Similar to Pavlov’s conditioning of dogs to salivate to the sound of a bell, social knowledge and attitudes may be acquired by the mere association of events in our social worlds. Social hierarchies in societies that are based on race, for example, produce repetitive experiences that create the attitudinal climate that justifies those hierarchies. This form of learning is known as classical conditioning or associational learning.

Similar to Skinner’s chickens or rats in a “Skinner box,” social attitudes may be directly rewarded or punished, when, for example, a child waves a Confederate flag. This form of learning is known as “operant” or “respondent” conditioning.

Perhaps most important, social attitudes are acquired through exposure to the mass media – a form of observational learning first described by Albert Bandura (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; 1963).

Taken together, our social knowledge – of a person or group—forms what social psychologists call a schema, the “…knowledge representations that include information about a person, group, or situation” (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, p. 59). Schemas, then, change or accommodate to new information, or serve as a filter for the assimilation of new knowledge to fit the existing schema.

A great deal of the problem of achieving World Peace is the creation of schemas (mental representations) of the enemy that justify the making of war (Rieber, 1991).
These schemas as difficult to counter-act, as new information is assimilated in a way that produces a confirmation bias: interpretations support the extant belief system.

Schemas may also produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the holder of the belief interacts with social targets in a way that produces the very behaviors that the person prophesized. An example would be the teacher who treats minority children as if they can’t learn, and therefore doesn’t challenge them, reward them or nurture them; and the children end up under-performing.

The Power of Expectations

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a demonstration of the power of expectations. These expectations—our stores of social knowledge or schemas—may be more or less influential based on a number of factors. The salience of an attitude object is the extent to which it is easily noticeable. Racial minority status, for example, is typically more salient than religious status. Schemas may also vary in their cognitive accessibility—the readiness with which they might come to mind. In the U.S., schemas for African Americans might be more accessible than those for Native Americans (who have been more “out of sight and out of mind” in American ethn-cultural politics).

Unfortunately, much of our social knowledge is prone to error and bias. In addition to the confirmation bias noted earlier, people are prone to the false consensus bias, or “the tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people hold similar views to our own” (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, p. 75). This error in thinking has also been known as pluralistic ignorance (Breed, & Ktsanes, 1961), and is sometimes subject to conformity pressures or the unique decision making processes that occurs in groups known as groupthink (Janis, 2007).

People are prone to think that their opinion is more likely to be shared by the majority, a problem known as the false consensus bias (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014). A related problem is the overconfidence bias, “…a tendency to be overconfident in our own skills, abilities, and judgments” (Jhangiani & Talley, p. 78). In fact, we are biased about our biases, something that Jhangiani and Talley (2014) refer to as “The Bias Blind Spot.”

Social Cognition and Affect![](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Our thoughts and feelings influence each other. People who are in a good mood have more positive thoughts about themselves and others. Our moods and feelings shape our thoughts in ways that are consistent with those feelings.

According to Jhangiani and Talley (2014), every stimulus evokes an affective evaluation, and the affective heuristic suggests that we use those feelings as a short cut to our thoughts about that stimulus. For example, the term, “radical Jihadist terrorist” evokes strong emotions that have a number of cognitive beliefs tied to those emotions.
Because “affective states can directly influence our social judgments,” (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, p. 92), it could be that the general public’s support for war is due in part to the celebration of heroism in mass marketed motion pictures. Similarly, anti-war sentiments might be engineered by pairing affective states with appropriate anti-war cognitions.

[9/11 – stimulus for war? Or wakeup call for peace?]

People who have positive thoughts or expectations about the future (what Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, refer to as an “optimistic explanatory style”), tend to live longer, healthier, and happier lives. When coupled with a sense of self efficacy, the belief that we have the ability to produce the outcomes we seek, individuals have the capacity to shape utopian futures.

In the context of this volume, we affirm that the violence we see in the world is the result of the necessary growing pains of a species striving toward self expression. That striving is toward an eventual peaceful co-existence among the people of the world, and what we do, today, will either facilitate or inhibit

References


