

Social Cognition and Theory of Personality in Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Social cognition refers to the mental representations and processes that underlie social judgments and behavior, for example, the application of stereotypes to members of social groups. Theories of social cognition have generally assumed that mental representations are abstract and stable and that they are activated and applied by relatively automatic, context-independent processes. Recent evidence is inconsistent with these expectations. However, social-cognitive processes have been shown to be adaptive to the perceiver's current social goals, communicative contexts, and bodily states. Human language and social cognition are closely linked. Advanced social cognition is necessary for children to acquire language, and language allows forms of social understanding (and, more broadly, culture) that would otherwise be impossible. Both "language" and "social cognition" are complex constructs, involving many independent cognitive mechanisms, and the comparative approach provides a powerful route to understanding the evolution of such mechanisms. Meta-analysis in social cognition involves four themes or subdomains that coherently recruited the cerebellum, and were related to very similar tasks and stimulus types. These four themes involved studies on mirroring, mentalizing, general traits and abstractions. Many psychological theories have been proposed over the years to explain human behavior. In the agentic sociocognitive view, people are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events. One common dichotomy separates self into agent and object. The dual functions of the self typically operate interactively. In this article, we reviewed the relation between social cognition and language and communication, and the theory of personality in psychology.

Keywords: Social cognition, Cerebellum, Meta-analysis, Abstract Mentalizing, Stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

Cognition refers to the many different processes by which creatures understand and make sense of the world. The term does much the same work as was previously done by the term 'information processing' and is strongly influenced by developments in computing beginning in the 1940s. Perception, attention, memory and action planning would all be examples of cognitive processes. All these processes are important in social interactions and the study of information processing in a social setting is referred to as social cognition. The goal of social cognition is to provide mechanistic,

process oriented explanations of complex social phenomena [1]

Social cognition concerns the various psychological processes that enable individuals to take advantage of being part of a social group. Of major importance to social cognition are the various social signals that enable us to learn about the world. Such signals include facial expressions, such as fear and disgust, which warn us of danger, and eye gaze direction, which indicate where interesting things can be found. Such signals are particularly important in infant development. Social referencing, for example, refers to the phenomenon in

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which infants refer to their mothers' facial expressions to determine whether or not to approach a novel object. We can learn a great deal simply by observing others.

Much of this signalling seems to happen automatically and unconsciously on the part of both the sender and the receiver. We can learn to fear a stimulus by observing the response of another, in the absence of awareness of that stimulus. By contrast, learning by instruction, rather than observation, does seem to depend upon awareness of the stimulus, since such learning does not generalize to situations where the stimulus is presented subliminally. Learning by instruction depends upon a metacognitive process through which both the sender and the receiver recognize that signals are intended to be signals. An example would be the 'ostensive' signals that indicate that what follows are intentional communications. Infants learn more from signals that they recognize to be instructive.

Social cognition is an important human ability that allows understanding the social origin and purpose of the behaviors of other persons or the self (i.e., "body" reading) and their state of mind (i.e., "mind" reading or mentalizing). [2] found robust clusters of activation in the cerebellum that were recruited during these social-cognitive processes. These clusters seemed to overlap with non-social functions reported in earlier meta-analyses on the role of the cerebellum in motor functions, emotions, executive control and language [3] 4].

Social cognition encompasses a number of distinctive capacities, including social learning, imitation, gaze following, and theory of mind (TOM). Such mechanisms form core elements of animal social behavior and human imitative culture. Social cognition involves a set of interacting but separable mechanisms, and the recent literature has led to an extensive dissection of social cognition and a correspondingly daunting profusion of terms.

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The study of social cognition is the subfield of social psychology concerned with understanding the mental representations and processes that contribute to human social judgments and social behavior the ways people perceive and evaluate other people and social groups and act toward them. Like most scientific fields that owe much to the "cognitive revolution" of the 1960s and '70s, the field of social cognition relied heavily on theories that describe perceivers as constructing, activating, and applying abstract symbolic representations (schemas, prototypes, etc.).

Themes in Social Cognition

The meta-analysis by [5] disclosed four themes or subdomains that coherently recruited the cerebellum, and were related to very similar tasks and stimulus types. These four themes involved studies on mirroring (i.e., related to the mirror network in the cortex) which refers to the understanding of visual or other perceptual input from human movements, mentalizing (without human movements) focusing on specific events, general traits and abstractions. The first three themes were used in two earlier meta-analyses on social neuroscience by [6] [7], while the latter theme was inspired by recent research on abstraction in social mentalizing [8].

These four themes were identified based on the similarities and overlap between stimulus input, task requirements, and empirical clusters revealed by an activation likelihood estimation (ALE) analysis. The findings are summarized as follows: First, Mirroring involves the observation of human motion (e.g., by hands and fingers, face, and legs) with or without a focus on the intention of the agent, which typically recruits the mirror network in the cortex [9]. Cerebellar activity was found in about 28% of the mirror studies.

Secondly, Event Mentalizing encompasses mentalizing about the actor's momentary intentions and beliefs, given a behavioral (event) description that does not involve perceptual input from human motion [10].

Approximately 22% of the studies in the meta-analysis revealed cerebellar activity. Thirdly, Person Mentalizing involves inferring enduring characteristics of a person or the self, such as traits and preferences [11]. Again, cerebellar activity was limited to 25% of the studies.

Finally, Abstract Mentalizing includes studies that contrast high against low abstraction in social cognition [12]. For instance, contrasting person judgments against visual descriptions of the same behaviors (e.g., respectively judging “why” or “how” a person is reading a book), or by contrasting the more distant and abstract past or future, or even contrasting hypothetical events with the momentary present. Abstraction recruited very strong and robust cerebellar activity in 67%-100% of the studies.

Relationship between Language and Social Cognition

Social cognition encompasses a number of distinctive capacities, including social learning, imitation, gaze following, and theory of mind (TOM). Such mechanisms form core elements of animal social behavior and human imitative culture. Language can be defined as a bidirectional system that permits the expression of arbitrary thoughts as signals and the reverse interpretation of those signals as thoughts. Although most animals have communication systems that allow some biologically important concepts or emotions to be expressed vocally, visually, or otherwise, humans appear to be unique in possessing a system that allows any concept we can entertain to be expressed and understood. Yet although language itself is unique to our species, many of the mechanisms underlying it are shared with other species [13]. Social cognition is closely linked to the evolution of language. Advanced social cognition is required for children to acquire language: sophisticated “mind-reading” abilities are necessary to deduce word meanings and communicate pragmatically [14] [15]. Second, once in place, language provides a powerful new tool for social cognition, one that is at the center of human culture.

Our capacity to share thoughts socially allows human cultures to accumulate knowledge in a way that would be impossible without language and underpins the progressive accumulation of complexity seen in most aspects of culture, from science and technology to myth and religion. Together, social cognition and language probably formed an evolutionary cycle wherein advances in one fed advances in the other, and it is unclear what human cognition (social or otherwise) would be like without the powerful cultural augmentation that language provides. Research on nonhuman animals can play a central role in understanding the evolution of social cognition on its own, nonlinguistic, terms.

Social Cognition and Communication

The adaptiveness of cognition to current situations is particularly evident in regard to the social situation, including communicative relationships between the perceiver and others. Communicative relevance has recently been shown to moderate the well-known tendency to enhance in-group identity and derogate out-group identity through systematic differences in language use when describing positive or negative behaviors of in-group and out-group members. The so-called linguistic intergroup bias [16] effect is that, when describing positive in-group behaviors, people tend to use abstract concepts (e.g., adjectives) to imply that such behaviors are enduring characteristics of in-group members. So if John assists an elderly woman across the street, a member of John’s in-group might say “John is helpful.”

Abstract terms are similarly used to describe negative behaviors of out-group members. In contrast, people minimize the diagnostic significance of negative in-group behaviors (and positive out-group behaviors) by describing these with concrete, highly specific terms. An out-group member might say, “John walked across the street with the woman.” This influential theory assumes tacitly that the linguistic bias depends on autonomous inner processes, independent of communicative context.

Communicative contexts affect many types of social-cognitive processes. One oft-studied effect is that social perceivers tend to explain other people's behavior in terms of those people's inner personality characteristics, desires, or beliefs rather than in terms of the demands of social situations. This tendency has been viewed as automatic, fundamental, and linked to the properties of abstract mental processes. However, using the most minimal of cues a letterhead that read either "Institute for Social Research" or "Institute of Personality Research" to signal the nature of the audience for participants' questionnaire responses, [17] demonstrated the susceptibility of this supposedly fundamental and automatic attribution processes to contextual influences.

Social Cognitive Theory of Personality

Many psychological theories have been proposed over the years to explain human behavior. The view of human nature embodied in such theories and the causal processes they postulate have considerable import. What theorists believe people to be determines which aspects of human functioning they explore most thoroughly and which they leave unexamined. The conceptions of human nature in which psychological theories are rooted is more than a theoretical issue. They affect which human potentialities are cultivated, which are underdeveloped, and whether efforts at change are directed mainly at psychosocial, biological or sociostructural factors.

An Agentic View of Personality

In the agentic sociocognitive view, people are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events. People have the power to influence their own actions to produce certain results. The capacity to exercise control over one's thought processes, motivation, affect, and action operates through mechanisms of personal agency. Human agency has been conceptualized in at least three different ways-as either autonomous agency,

mechanically reactive agency or emergent interactive agency. The notion that humans operate as entirely independent agents has few serious advocates, although it is sometimes invoked in caricatures of cognitive theories of human behavior [18].

The tools for the exercise of agency are derived, in large part, from experiences but what is created by their generative use is not reducible to those experiences. Human action, being socially situated, is the product of a dynamic interplay of personal and situational influences. A second approach to the self system is to construe it as mechanically reactive agency. It is an internal system through which external influences operate mechanistically on action, but individuals exert no motivative, self-reflective, self-reactive, creative or directive influence on the process.

The self system is merely a repository for implanted structures and a conduit for external influences. The more dynamic models operating holistically include multilevel neural networks. However, a diverse mix of parallel distributed neural activity cannot remain fragmented. It requires an integrative system. Given the proactive nature of human functioning, such a system must have agentic capabilities as well as integrative reactive ones. Agentic functions get lodged in a hidden network operating without any consciousness. Consciousness is the very substance of phenomenal and functional mental life. It provides the information base for thinking about events, planning, constructing courses of action and reflecting on the adequacy of one's thinking and actions.

There is an important difference between being conscious of the experiences one is undergoing, and consciously producing given experiences. For example, consciousness of one's heart rate and consciously and intentionally doing things known to elevate one's heart rate illustrate the difference between passive undergoing and agentic doing. The purposive accessing and deliberative processing of information to fashion

efficacious courses of action represent the functional consciousness. Consciousness cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of the output of a mental process realized mechanically at nonconscious lower levels. In the connectionist line of theorizing, sensory organs deliver up information through their diverse pathways to the hidden network acting as the cognitive agent that does the construing, planning, motivating and regulating. However, stripped of consciousness and agentic capability of decision and action, people are mere automatons undergoing actions devoid of any subjectivity, conscious regulation, phenomenological life, or personal identity.

In social cognitive theory, people are agentic operators in their life course not just onlooking hosts of internal mechanisms orchestrated by environmental events. They are sentient agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences. The sensory, motor and cerebral systems are tools people use to accomplish the tasks and goals that give meaning and direction to their lives [19]. Agentic action shapes brain development and functioning throughout the life course [20]. It is not just exposure to stimulation, but agentic action in exploring, manipulating and influencing the environment that counts. By regulating their own motivation and the activities they pursue, people produce the experiences that form the neurobiological substrate of symbolic, social, psychomotor and other skills.

Dualistic Conceptions of Personality

One common dichotomy separates self into agent and object. People are said to be agents when they act on the environment but objects when they reflect and act on themselves. Social cognitive theory questions such a dualistic view of self. Proaction does not operate isolatedly from self-reaction. The dual functions of the self typically operate interactively. In their daily transactions, people formulate courses of action, anticipate their likely effects, and act on their judgments.

While acting on their environment, they are also evaluating and reacting to themselves. They monitor and analyze how well their thinking and corresponding actions have served them and change their strategies accordingly. One is just as much an agent monitoring and reflecting on one's experiences and exerting self-influence as in acting on the environment. It is simply a shift in perspective of the same agent between self and environment. Even when individuals are the object of external influence, they are not just passive recipients of stimulus inputs. They act agentially on that influence in cognitive, affective, and behavioral ways that enhance, neutralize or subvert it.

Rather than splitting the self into object and agent, social cognitive theory treats this static dichotomy as a dynamic system of interlocking functions. Social cognitive theory also rejects the fractionation of human agency into multiple selves. A theory of personality cast in terms of multiple selves plunges one into deep philosophical waters. It requires a regress of selves to a presiding overseer self that selects and manages the collection of selves to suit given purposes.

Actually, there is only one self that can visualize different futures and select courses of action designed to attain desired futures and avoid aversive ones. Actions are regulated by a person not by a cluster of selves doing the choosing and guiding. The fractionation of agency into different types of selves poses additional conceptual problems. Once one starts fractionating the self, where does one stop? For example, an athletic self can be split into an envisioned tennis self and a golfing self. These separable selves would, in turn, have their subselves. Thus, a golfing self can be subdivided into different facets of the athletic ability to include a driving self, a fairway self, a sand-trapped self, and a putting self. How does one decide where to stop fractionating selves? Here, too, there is only one self that can strive to perfect different sets of competencies required

for an envisioned pursuit. Diversity of action arises not from a collection of agentive selves but from the different options considered by the one and the same agentive self. It is the person who is doing the thinking, regulating, and reflecting not a homunculus-overseeing self.

People striving to realize an envisioned future guide and motivate their efforts through a set of self-regulatory mechanisms. These are governed by appraisal of personal capabilities for different pursuits, long-range aspiration merged with working proximal subgoals that lead to its fulfillment, positive and negative outcome expectations for different life courses, the value placed on those envisioned outcomes, and the perceived environmental constraints and opportunity structures. These represent some of the influential sociocognitive determinants of the courses that lives take. One and the same person exercises these self-influences differentially for different purposes, in different activity domains, and in different social contexts.

Duality of Structure and Process of the Self System

The affinity to global dispositional constructs has also fostered a disjointed duality of process and structure that pervades the field of personality. This dualistic view is also reflected in the dichotomization of personality theories as embodying structuralism or functionalism. Theories that specify how human agency is exercised are often mistakenly depicted as solely process theories. Trait approaches are said to be structural theories. Social cognitive theory rejects this false separateness of structural and process theories.

Regulatory processes operate through guiding self structures rather than disembodied from them. Self structures do not emerge autonomously and give rise to behavior divorced from any operational processes. Developed self structures are translated into actions through regulatory functions. The

experiences produced by regulatory processes operating on the environment, in turn, shape self structures. In short, both the structure of a self system and the regulatory processes must work together in human functioning.

To illustrate the interdependence of structure and process consider the self-regulation of moral conduct. Social cognitive theory provides a detailed account of how moral standards are constructed through cognitive processing of diverse sources of information conveyed by modeled moral commitments, direct instruction in moral precepts, and the evaluative reactions of others to conduct that has ethical and moral significance [4]. The nature and pattern of the acquired moral standards represent an enduring cognitive structure for judging the moral status of conduct in situations containing many morally relevant decisional ingredients. One does not have a full set of moral standards on Monday, none on Tuesday, and a new set on Wednesday.

The standards of conduct are enduring unless they happen to be altered by powerful experiences. Moral structure is translated into action via self-regulatory mechanisms operating through a set of agentive subfunctions. These include self-monitoring of conduct; judging the conduct in relation to one's moral standards and the circumstances under which it occurs; and applying evaluative self-sanctions depending on whether the conduct measures up to the internal standards or violates them. In short, processes do not operate in a vacuum without structural properties that provide the substance and direction for those processes. People do not run around mindlessly engaging in structure-free processing of experiences. The dualistic thinking is also reflected in suggestions that the processes of sociocognitive theories be combined with trait theory, such as the five-factor taxonomy, to form the comprehensive theory of personality.

CONCLUSION

Social cognition encompasses a number of distinctive capacities, including social learning, imitation, gaze following, and theory of mind (TOM). Such mechanisms form core elements of animal social behavior and human imitative culture. Social cognitive theory provides a detailed account of how moral standards

are constructed through cognitive processing of diverse sources of information conveyed by modeled moral commitments, direct instruction in moral precepts, and the evaluative reactions of others to conduct that has ethical and moral significance.

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