Person Perception

Second Edition

Schneider · Hastorf · Ellsworth

second edition

person perception

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TOPICS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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foreword

This series *Topics in Social Psychology* is directed toward the student with no prior background in social psychology. Taken as a whole, the series covers the ever-expanding field of social psychology reasonably well, but a major advantage of the series is that each individual book was written by well-known scholars in the area. The instructor can select a subset of the books to make up the course in social psychology, the particular subset depending on the instructor's own definition of our field. The original purpose of this series was to provide such freedom for the instructor while maintaining a thoughtful and expert treatment of each topic. In addition, the first editions of the series have been widely used in a variety of other ways: such as supplementary reading in nonpsychology courses; to introduce more advanced courses in psychology, or for the sheer fun of peeking at recent developments in social psychology.

We have developed second editions that serve much the same purpose. Each book is somewhat longer and more open in design, uses updated materials, and in general takes advantage of constructive feedback from colleagues and students across the country. So many people found the first editions of the individual books useful that we have tried to make the second editions even more thorough and complete, and therefore more easily separated from the rest of the series.

This volume tackles the problems of social perception—the factors affecting the way we see others. It includes discussion of age old concerns, such as when we like others and when we don't. It also presents and critically discusses recent evidence on such questions about the attribution of motivational states to others as: do the others *intend* to cause harm to a third person? Undergraduates have always found the topic of social perception interesting, and I think this volume is the best writing I have seen at this level.

Charles A. Kiesler

preface

We began talking about a revision of the earlier edition of this book four years ago. The first edition appeared at a time when person perception as an area of research had reached a stage of adolescence; the appearance of the adult form was already apparent but the rapidly increasing enthusiasm for the area was matched neither by theoretical sophistication nor by a strong basis in empirical data. What we could only dimly see then, namely that person perception would become a mature focus of research concern for social psychology, has come to pass.

In the past decade the attribution literature has grown by leaps and has divided itself into questions about perception of self and perception of others. Research on information processing approaches to person perception has become much more salient, and research areas such as nonverbal and expressive behavior have increasingly been seen as relevant to person perception processes.

Although when we began the revision in 1976 it was already clear that the relevant research literature had grown enormously, we initially thought in terms of a general updating with some increase in length to take account of some new areas that we wanted to introduce. Schneider and Hastorf agreed that the former should take the major responsibility for the revision. Polefka was committed to other things and withdrew, so Ellsworth was invited to help out in general and to provide expertise in the nonverbal and expressive areas. Naturally enough these things never work out quite the way they are planned. What we hoped would be a summer's hard work turned out to be two years of concentrated activity as we exchanged drafts of chapters, argued with one another about the interpretations of this or that new material, and tried to bring all the old and new material into a focus and a mutually supportive relationship. Our file of correspondence is larger than many book manuscripts, and we have met for week-long periods several times. We have enjoyed the collaboration and have all benefited from our intense and invigorating discussions.

This edition is much longer than the first. This reflects not only the updating of the traditional attribution and impression formation areas, but the addition of much new material. In the first edition we stayed with what might

be called the fashionable, mainstream areas of research. In this edition we have included material from areas that are not so familiar to traditional person perception researchers, and it is our hope that such researchers will come to see that the field has been occupied with a relatively small set of the interesting questions that might be asked.

This then is a major revision. Although we began by changing the earlier edition, through successive revisions we dropped more and more of the old in favor of the new. The reader who is familiar with the first edition will recognize some sections and sentences, but we estimate that less than 10 percent of the present edition comes from the first. We probably would have finished sooner if we had ignored the earlier edition, but that is another story.

A number of people have helped in numerous ways. Families and friends have been patient. Mark Snyder and Chuck Kiesler read the entire manuscript and helped with suggestions for trimming it and focusing it on the most relevant issues. One or more chapters have been read by Norman Anderson, Nancy Cantor, Reid Hastie, Nancy Hirschberg, Sam Kingsley, Robert Kleck, Leslie McArthur, Tom Ostrom, and Roger Tourangeau. The authors especially want to express their thanks to Joyce Sanders, Hazel Saldana, Sharon McMillan, and Linda Delgado for typing, editorial help, and forbearance. Either the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health have provided research support to all of us at various times. A portion of that research is reported herein. The Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development at Stanford University provided support for Hastorf. It also provided a locus for meetings.

San Antonio
April 1979

D.J.S.
A.H.H.
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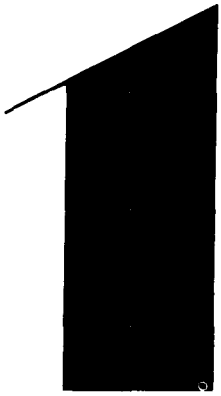

Some Issues in Perception

introduction

PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE AND OBJECTS

There is nothing more important to us, with the exception of ourselves, than the world of other people. Other people are easily able to influence our joys and satisfactions and can cause us sadness and pain. Consequently, we are all interested in learning about other people, and we all have very strong convictions about how we come to know and to understand other people. When you get to know another person you are engaged in a process of perceiving that person. You not only see the other person as a physical stimulus, but you observe behavior; furthermore, you draw conclusions about what you have seen.

Imagine, for example, that you have just entered the classroom for your first meeting of a social psychology course. Your attention is naturally drawn toward the professor; not only is she standing in a rather dominant position in the room, but you are particularly interested in her. She is new to the faculty this year, and you have not been able to find out whether she is hard or easy, stimulating or dull, nice or arrogant, helpful or aloof. You observe her physical appearance: the color of her hair, the color and style of her clothing, her shape and height. You notice how she walks and her mannerisms; perhaps you pay attention to the way she talks. Of course, you will be especially concerned with the content of her comments. From all this you will draw conclusions. You will decide that her hair is brown, her suit is light green, she has a nice figure, and she appears to be about 5'6" tall. She paces and makes frequent gestures with her hands; she has trouble looking away from her notes and her voice is hesitant. You may even draw further conclusions that she is nervous and that she seems likely to make you work hard in the course. You may go further still and decide that she is insecure because she is new, but that she seems to be a basically nice, helpful, and intelligent person.

You do all this and more. You perceive your professor, and obviously this perception involves several complex processes that operate at different levels. But how you perceive people is from a psychological perspective one aspect of general perception and cognitive processes. You perceive both objects and people. The process by which we gain knowledge of others is clearly a complex

one, and people are much more complicated than are most other stimuli. It is not surprising, therefore, that psychologists have concentrated their efforts on exploring less complex phenomena, such as the perception of size, shape, and distance. Social psychologists have begun to explore how we know others, however, and our goal in this book is to define some current ways of thinking about person perception, to describe some of the research, and to point to some problems that demand exploration.

Both philosophers and psychologists have long been intrigued with the nature of the human perceptual process. One explanation for their interest is that people are naturally curious about their contact with the outside world and wonder how their experiences are caused and to what degree they reflect the world accurately. Beyond general curiosity, the reason for the interest stems from an apparent paradox, the basis of which lies in the difference between the nature of our experiences and our knowledge of how those experiences are caused.

Anyone who takes the trouble to think about and to describe his own experiences usually finds himself overwhelmed with both their immediacy and their structure. One's experience of the world is dominated by objects that stand out in space and that have such attributes as shape, color, and size. The immediacy of such experiences becomes obvious if you close your eyes, turn your head in a new direction, and then open your eyes again. A structured world of objects is immediately present in awareness, without delay and without any consciousness of interpretative or inferential activity. The world appears to be given to us in experience. Yet a causal analysis of these events indicates a very different state of affairs.

You have opened your eyes and you experience a blue vase about six inches high situated on a table. The vase appears to be at a certain distance, and its shape and color are equally clear. Let us now remind ourselves of the causal events that are involved. Light waves of a certain wavelength are reflected off the vase. Some of them impinge on the retina of your eye, and if enough retinal cells are irritated, some visual nerves will fire and a series of electrical impulses will be carried through the sensory apparatus, including the subcortical centers, and will finally arrive at the cortex. This description paints a picture of a very indirect contact with the world: light waves to retinal events to sensory nerve events to subcortical events and, finally, to cortical events, from which visual experiences result. What is especially important is that this causal description reveals a very different picture than does our naive description of experience. (This causal description led a famous German physiologist to remark that "we are aware of our nerves, not of objects.") Thus, we have a conflict between our everyday-life experiences of objects and an analysis of how these experiences come to exist. How *does* the human being create a coherent perceptual world out of a maze of physical impingements?

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PERCEPTUAL ACTIVITY

Our world of experience has structure Let us begin with this fact of experience and explore how the structure may be achieved. First of all, we know that our

experiences are ultimately dependent on our sensory apparatus, which for visual experiences would include both the retina of the eye and the sensory neurons connecting the retina to the visual areas of the cortex. This apparatus plays, in a manner of speaking, the role of translator. Light waves impinge on the eyes and we experience color. Sound waves impinge on the ear, and we experience pitch. Without the sensory apparatus we would have no contact with the external world. There remains, however, the question of the nature of this translation.

A number of philosophers and psychologists have conceived of the translation process as an essentially passive one, completely determined by the physical properties of the stimulus and by the structure of the receptors and sensory nervous system. They conceive of our sensory apparatus as working somewhat like a high-speed translation device. Physical impingements are looked up in an impingement-experience dictionary, and the proper experience is created in the perceiver.

This conception has led to arguments as to how much of this dictionary is present at birth and how much is the product of our learning history. One reason for the popularity of the passive recording view of perception is the immediacy and "givenness" of our experience. Our experiences are immediate and they feel direct. These feelings led to the belief that the translation process must be automatic and built in.

One argument against that position stems from the fact that our experience of the world is highly selective. If we passively translated and recorded all stimuli, our world would be a jumble of experiences; while you were reading a book, you would also be aware of the pressure of your clothes on your body and of all the sounds around you. But from a myriad of impinging stimuli, we are actually aware of only certain objects and certain attributes of those objects. Anyone who has asked two different persons to describe the same scene has been struck by the fact that they often describe it very differently: each selects different events and different attributes of the events. Given this phenomenon, we must be more than passive translators. In fact, we must be active processors of information. The world is not merely revealed to us; rather, we play an active role in the creation of our experiences.

In one demonstration Leeper (1935) used an ambiguous picture that can be seen as either an old hag or as an attractive young woman (Fig. 1.1). Most who inspect the picture closely and continuously for a time see first one and then the other. Leeper had the original picture redrawn so that one version emphasized the young woman (Fig. 1.1b) and another emphasized the old hag (Fig. 1.1c). Subjects who were initially shown one of these redrawings found themselves "locked in" on that view later on when the original ambiguous picture was presented. One hundred percent of the subjects who had had prior experience with the version emphasizing the hag saw only the hag in their first look at the ambiguous picture; 95 percent of the subjects who had had prior experience with the version emphasizing the young woman saw only the young woman when first looking at the same ambiguous picture. The subjects had been given a set to process the input stimuli in a certain way, and they

Fig. 1.1 The young woman and the old hag. (From Leeper 1935.)

created a structure consistent with that set. Although our experiences are both immediate and structured, extremely complex participation by the organism, including the active selection and processing of stimulus impingements, is involved in their creation.

This active role played by the perceiver has been described in terms of the influence of set or expectation in the achievement of structure. The Leeper research demonstrates that our perception of an ambiguous figure can be strongly influenced by an expectation created by our first viewing of an apparently similar picture. Anyone who has observed the spectators at athletic events can't help noticing that two apparently reasonable people can experience a play in football or basketball in very different ways as a function of having been "tuned" by different expectations and purposes. This fact of experience was illustrated by a case study of a football game (Hastorf and Cantril 1954). It so happened that Dartmouth and Princeton played each other in football one November afternoon. The game turned out to be very rough, and tempers flared both during and after the game. Immediately following the game, partisans for both schools made accusations that the other school had played rough and dirty football. The school papers, the school alumni magazines, and a number of the metropolitan newspapers highly publicized the whole affair. There was clearly a very real disagreement as to what had actually happened during the game. What is of special interest to us in our attempt to understand the achievement of structured experiences were the results of showing a movie of the game to a group of Dartmouth students and a group of Princeton students. Keeping in mind that an identical movie was shown to both groups of students, it is interesting to refer to the number of infractions perceived in the same film by two groups of people with different loyalties and different expectations (see Table 1.1). Students (particularly those from Princeton) tended to see the team from the other university as having committed the most infractions.

TABLE 1.1
Data from Questionnaire Checked While Seeing Film
(From Hastorf and Cantril 1954.)

	Mean number of infractions checked against	
	Dartmouth team	*Princeton team*
By Dartmouth students	4.3	4.4
By Princeton students	9.8	4.2

Not only do people pay attention to different things, but they differ in how they categorize events. It is very difficult to stay at the level of raw experience in the perceptual process, although historically a number of psychologists have felt that with proper training people could see events and objects without categorizing them. However, most of us give verbal labels to what we see, and this helps to structure our world. For example, the subjects in Leeper's experiment did not see a complex pattern of light and dark nor even "a person" (a possible category); they saw an old hag or a young woman. The categories we use are derived from our past history and are largely dependent on our language and our cultural background. Some of these categories are apparently ubiquitous and well-agreed on by perceivers. Classification of objects according to the attributes of size and shape seems obvious, but we can also perceive in terms of color and texture. We may even see things in terms of functions instead of size, color, or shape: the large blue pen and the small red pencil are suddenly similar when we want to jot down a telephone number. Moreover, people differ in their use of categories as a function of their experiences or purposes. For example, Dittman, Parloff, and Boomer (1965) have nicely demonstrated that dancers, unlike most people, are more responsive to bodily cues than to facial cues. Whatever the nature of the categories we use, they play a crucial role in our processing of information.

Our world of experience has stability When we open our eyes and look at a scene, we are not overwhelmed with constant shifts in the picture as our eyes and our attention wander. There is a certain enduring aspect to our experience. We select certain facets of the situation and stick with them. Check this statement against your own experience with the ambiguous picture in Fig. 1.1. If it was like the experience of most people, your first interpretation (or perceptual organization) of the picture, whether it was the old hag or the young woman, continued to demand your attention. It was hard to "find" the other one. You may make various attempts to shift the focus of attention by blinking your eyes or by concentrating on a certain part of the picture, but those stratagems do not always work.

The most obvious example of stability in our experience is *the constancies* in perception. Constancy phenomena have been most carefully described in regard to the perception of size, color, shape, and brightness. Let us consider

size constancy as an example. You are sitting in a chair in your living room. Another person walks into the room, moves over to a table by the window, picks up a magazine, and then goes across the room to sit down and read it. What are the successive visual-stimulus events impinging on your retina and your successive experiences? Every time the person moves closer to you, the image on your retina, or *proximal stimulus*, gets larger; in fact, if she moves from 20 feet away to 10 feet away, the height of the image on your eye doubles in size. The opposite occurs as she moves away from you, because the size of the retinal image is inversely proportional to the distance of the object from you. Furthermore, when the person moves near the window, more light is available and more light is reflected to the retina. Yet your experience does not fit this description of the stimulus events. While the person is moving about the room, you experience her as staying the same size and the same color. In spite of dramatic alterations in the proximal stimulus (that is, the image on the retina), you experience a stable world. Given this discrepancy between proximal-stimulus events and experience, the person must actively process information to produce stability of experience.

Let us think of the perceptual act as a complex form of problem-solving, the goal of which is to create a stability in which our perceptions bear some relationship to external events. We can then draw an analogy between perceptual problem-solving and scientific problem-solving. Just as the scientist attempts to reduce a complex jumble of events to a small set of variables that serves as a set of determining conditions for a particular phenomenon, so we search out the invariant aspects of a situation to produce stable perceptions. The scientist searches for invariance in order to understand and to predict the world; we as perceivers also seek to understand and to predict our immediate world so that we may behave in that world to our advantage. In other words, the perceptual act can be said to generate understanding that we can use as a basis for action.

Our world of experience is meaningful The connotation of *meaningful* here is that structured and stable events are not isolated from one another but appear to be related in some orderly fashion over time. Both structure and stability are probably necessary for meaning to exist. Because it is so common for the world of experience to make sense to us, the most powerful way to point out the importance of the phenomenon is to try to conceive of a world that does not make sense. Events would follow each other with no apparent causal relationships. Almost every event would entail surprise. Nothing would seem familiar. The general experience would be one of chaos. Such a state of affairs is so alien to our everyday-life experience that it is extremely difficult to imagine. Our experiences usually *are* meaningful because they are structured and they are stable; they are related because they seem familiar, but particularly because the events have implications for one another.

The person actively processes stimuli, categorizes stimulus events, and relates those stimulus events to both past and present events. Each of us has a linguistic coding system that involves a set of implicative relationships. The

impinging stimuli provide the raw material; the person, with the aid of language, produces the meaning.

Past experience, language, present motivational state, and goals for the future influence our perceptions of the present. Our past learning has a significant influence on perception, but it always operates within a framework of purposive activity. We have all learned many rules, and the ones we apply are selected to achieve particular purposes. The perceptual process is an achievement by the person, and perception would not exist without active problem-solving. Our perceptions do have meaning, they do make sense; and meaning and sense derive from both our own past experiences and our present purposes. Without the presence of meaning and sense as active, organizing agents, perception as we know it would not exist.

All behavior and all perception include the influences of both our past experiences and purposes. Unfortunately these two powerful determinants of our perceptions have often been termed *distorting influences*. Perception was thought to be stimulus-determined unless past experience or motivational state entered the picture and caused us to deviate from "what we ought to see." The notion of the existence of an "objective observer" who sees the world accurately because he has had no past experience or because he is disinterested is patently false. If such a person did exist, we would have to predict that he would not see a structured, stable, and meaningful world.

In summary, our past experiences and purposes play an absolutely necessary role in providing us with knowledge of the world that has structure, stability, and meaning. Without them, events would not make sense; with them, our perceptions define a predictable world, an orderly stage for us to act on.

The Perception of People

Let us now turn our attention more explicitly to the perception of other people. The characteristics of the world of experience in general should be the same for our experiences of people, but are there special facets to our experience when we perceive other human beings? Is there not more to our experience of other people than their size, color, and shape? The answer is certainly yes.

As an aid in our discussion of person perception, consider an example of one person describing another. In *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey describes Dr. Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School:

> Such was the man who, at the age of thirty-three, became headmaster of Rugby. His outward appearance was the index of his inward character: everything about him denoted energy, earnestness, and the best intentions. His legs, perhaps, were shorter than they should have been; but the sturdy athletic frame, especially when it was swathed (as it usually was) in the flowing robes of a Doctor of Divinity, was full of an imposing vigour;