

Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4 Beyond basic cognition and emotion

Topic 3 Delving deeper into social cognition – Part 1 of 4

Dr Wijnand van Tilburg

Department of Psychology, King's College London

Dr Caroline Catmur

Department of Psychology, King's College London

Professor Francesca Happé

Department of Social Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry, King's College London

Lecture transcript

Slide 3

So far we covered in week four the topics of attitudes and appraisals. Here and there we looked at how attitudes and appraisals are influenced by other people or how our social environment shapes how we evaluate our environment, others, and ourselves. In the current lectures, this social aspect of these processes will be examined. In particular, we will discuss a number of important social cognitive processes.

Before getting into detail about social cognition, let me first give you a little overview on what is to come in these sessions. First, I will introduce briefly the field of social cognitive research. We will cover perspective taking and theory of mind. Extending these topics, Dr. Caroline Catmur will give a guest lecture on the neural basis of empathy.

Next, we will have a closer look at social inference processes-- in particular, how do people form an opinion of others? Of course we cannot cover these topics fully, so these sessions will serve as a taster of the more important phenomena.

Finally, Dr. Francesca Hape will look at social cognitive processes from a different angle. What happens when social cognition goes wrong? In particular, she will discuss social cognitive processes in people with an autistic spectrum disorder and the consequences for social perceptions and inferences.

Slide 5

Social cognition is an area of psychology that is located on the intersection of social psychology-- the study of psychological processes in the presence of others-- and cognitive psychology-- the study of mental processes, such as attention, perception, and memory. Social cognition developed around the '60s and looks at the processes that people use to make sense of and navigate through their social world.

Social cognition developed in response to three psychological assumptions that researchers made. First of all, people are consistency seekers. That is, people wish to hold coherent, meaningful perceptions of the world around them. When confronted with inconsistency, people are motivated to address this issue-- for example, by changing their beliefs or dismissing the inconsistent information.

A classic example of consistency research is that by Festinger. Festinger studied cognitive dissonance-- an inconsistency between one's beliefs and one's actions-- and found that people who were performing behaviour that is inconsistent with their beliefs simply changed their beliefs to accommodate their inconsistency.

Another perspective that social cognition incorporates is that people are naive scientists. What does that mean? It means that social cognition researchers often assume that people actively try to make sense of the world. They try to form accurate perceptions of what is going on around and within them. Mind you, these perceptions need not be correct, and the way in which people try to gain these accurate perceptions may be wrong.

As covered in the earlier session, people, for example, use heuristics to make sense of the world around them. Although these are efficient, they do not always lead to accurate judgements. The idea that people use heuristics and other mental shortcuts to achieve a seemingly accurate and consistent perspective of the world is part of the [INAUDIBLE] assumption. People are cognitive misers. That means that they save their cognitive resources, such as effort or time, when possible.

Slide 6

As mentioned before, social cognition has two pillars-- cognitive psychology and social psychology. How are these united? Let's look at the cognitive pillar first. An important insight from cognitive psychology was that people often go beyond the available information in their environment when perceiving the world around them.

Consider the words on this slide. What do you read? Probably you read the cat. But have a closer look at the letters H in "the" and A in "cat." Notice that they are the same? So how is it possible that when confronted with the identical letter, on one occasion, we see an H and on the other occasion we see an A?

One of the reasons for this is that people use existing knowledge structures when processing stimuli. In other words, "the" and "cat" and this prior existing knowledge is used to make sense of novel information, such as the ambiguous words presented here. In a way, we go beyond the information that is presented to us in our perception, we also use existing knowledge that we possess. In this particular case, we interpret the ambiguous letter in a way that is consistent with our prior knowledge.

Cognitive psychologists are interested in the processes that result in these perceptions. Likewise, social cognitive researchers try to figure out what cognitive processes, such as the use of existing knowledge, change the way we perceive the world around us.

Slide 7

So what about the second part of social cognition-- the second pillar of this field? Obviously, a characteristic of social cognition as compared to cognition in general is that social cognition is interested in how people make sense of social stimuli. How might that differ from other stimuli?

For example, consider the boxes on this slide. Cognitive psychologists may study how we perceive these boxes and how people make judgments of their sizes and other comparative judgements. Now consider this picture. What kind of judgement do we make about the two persons?

Similar to the boxes, we could compare them in terms of sizes or some other physical characteristic. But you may also make more subjective judgments. How trustworthy are the speakers? How much

do you like them? Who would you vote for in an election?

Relative to comparing boxes, it seems there is something special going on about the judgments of these social targets. We judge also their internal characteristics. Social cognitive psychologists hold that such judgments are quite different from how people evaluate non-social targets. In particular, people make social inferences and make subjective attributions about social targets. And these judgments may include a host of information that goes beyond what seems immediately present in the stimuli itself. We rely on history and prior knowledge, stereotypes, our own motives and attitudes, and so on.

Slide 8

Social cognition is a very large field and deals with a great many topics, some of which are listed here. We will focus on a few particularly relevant ones. Accessibility and salience are key cognitive processes that describe what kind of information we tend to-- whether this is social or non-social information.

Theory of mind-- people's ability to understand what goes on in another person's mind-- is an essential process to understanding empathic behaviour, such as perspective taking and understanding another person's emotions. Relatedly, social cognition focuses on person perception-- what attributions do we make when we see another person? Do we hold ourselves to different standards than we hold others to? And are we capable of making accurate inferences about others without being influenced by peripheral cues, such as stereotypes?

Slide 9

In order for people to make social judgments of others-- for example, judging how trustworthy, likable, competent, or friendly they are-- they need to, first of all, understand that these other people are independent from themselves and have their own wishes, motives, desires, beliefs, et cetera.

In particular, people require some understanding of the contents of another person's mind, especially in terms of beliefs and knowledge. This understanding is officially called a theory of mind. A theory of mind is essential. Without it, you may not be able to make accurate social inferences.

Imagine, for example, that you wish to buy a car. In the shop, a car dealer tells you that they have a very special deal just for you. Furthermore, she tells you that the car you are interested in is the best choice you could make and they have cancelled all their other appointments just to set you up with an excellent payment plan right away.

What do you think? Would you believe the car dealer, or would you be a bit suspicious? You probably realise that the car dealer has a different interest than you. You may want to make a responsible and carefully thought through decision. The dealer may want you to spend a lot of money and fast before you find another car at another dealer.

This is how theory of mind works. Thanks to possessing a theory of mind, you can figure out that the dealer may have different motives than you. And as a result, you may express some reservations in accepting all the things she says.

On the other hand, let's assume that you do not have a theory of mind. What would happen? Presumably, you would fail to make a distinction between what the dealer thinks and what is going on inside of your own mind. In particular, you may believe that the car dealer has the exact same goal as you do-- make a responsible and carefully thought through decision. As a result, you might end up making a bad deal.

When does theory of mind develop? Does everybody have a well-developed theory of mind? According to Piaget, children typically possess a developed theory of mind at around age 9. Reversely, children below age 9 cannot always take another person's perspective. But how can we

test that?

Slide 10

A classic way to test whether children have developed theory of mind is by using the Sally-Anne test-- named after the protagonist in a little story, Sally and Anne. This works as follows-- a psychologist shares with a child the following illustrated story or plays out the story with little figures.

First, Sally is reading a book. When she is done, Sally puts the book on the table. Sally leaves to get something to eat in the kitchen. Look, Anne comes in and moves the book from the table to the drawer. Then Anne leaves. Look, Sally comes back to read some more. The psychologist then asked questions-- where did Sally put the book? Where is the book now? And where will Sally look for the book first?

If a child possesses a theory of mind, then she or he will be able to tell that Sally will look on the table, given that this is the location she left the book at. Many younger children, however, will assume that Sally will look for the book in the drawer where Anne left it. Specifically, they are not able to separate the perspective of Sally and Anne.

Beyond the silly example of a car sale or placing books, theory of mind is hugely influential. It helps us understand others and take their perspectives, but also it helps us to empathise with others. For example, imagine you hear that your friend's brother is ill and went to the hospital. You may not know your friend's brother very well and his hospitalisation may not personally affect you. But you may nonetheless empathise with your friend. Your theory of mind allows you to understand that your friend may be sad and that you should support him.

Likewise, our empathy helps us to support others and to experience emotions on behalf of others. Furthermore, it helps us recognise and understand another person's emotions. Because empathic processes are so important in social cognition, the next lecture will be devoted to this topic. In particular, Dr. Catmur will discuss and share her insights on the neural basis for empathy and perspective taking in social settings.