Module:
Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4
Beyond basic cognition and emotion

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

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Lecture transcript

Slide 3
In the previous lecture, you learned about mirror neurons and empathic processes. Our understanding of what goes on in another person's mind is part of social inference processes and attributions. We attribute hostility to a person because he looks angry, we feel someone is trustworthy because she looks friendly, et cetera. In these cases, we more or less directly use the available information-- an angry expression or a friendly smile-- as a basis to make attributions.

Is that all the information that we use, or are there other bases for the social attributions that we make? It should come as no surprise that the attributions we make of others are influenced by a host of other factors. Let's go back to the topic of attitudes. Here, I introduce briefly the concept of stereotypes-- beliefs about groups.

Not surprisingly, stereotypes are a very influential source of information when we judge others. Consider this picture of a person who is dressed in a punk subculture fashion. What do we think of her? Perhaps you assume that she is an argumentative person-- consistent with the stereotype of punkers.

What about the artist Vincent van Gogh? Allegedly, he cut off his own ear. What does this say about him? Do we believe that it must have been an accident or a one-time mistake, or do we conclude that Van Gogh is simply an eccentric person as a whole?

These sort of questions are part of Attribution Theory, which is a set of psychological models that describe how people infer causal relations and the dispositional characteristics of others. Strikingly, research tells us that people have a very strong tendency to attribute things towards a person rather than towards situations. For example, people may be much more likely to take Van Gogh's missing ear as proof of him being an odd person, rather than considering that he may have lost it by accident or that it was a once occurring bad decision.

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Slide 4
People's tendency to over-attribute another person's behaviour to dispositional causes or personality, rather than taking into account situational factors, is so persistent that psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the fundamental attribution error. I will illustrate how this works with a classic study on this phenomenon conducted during the Cold War.

In this study by Jones and Harris, the researchers told participants to write a pro-Fidel Castro essay or a contra-Fidel Castro essay. So, importantly, participants were not allowed to choose, but had to write the essay that the experimenters asked them to write. Then participants judged how much the others liked Fidel Castro.

Strikingly, participants perceived those who were forced to write a pro-Castro essay as more positive towards Fidel Castro compared to those who wrote a contra-Castro essay. Thus, they attributed these participants' essays as reflecting their disposition-- in particular, their attitude towards Castro-- rather than being caused by the situation. This happened even though participants were fully aware that whether or not a person had to write a pro or contra Castro essay was the experimenter's demand, not their own choice.

Experiments, such as these and many more show how strongly people are inclined to attribute behaviour to individuals' personality or dispositions rather than recognising situational influences.

Slide 5
According to the fundamental attribution error, people tend to over-attribute another person's behaviour to dispositions rather than the environment.

But what about our own behaviour? Consider, for example, that you perform badly on an exam. What caused it? You may not be surprised to learn that people tend to blame situations or their environment. However, if the same thing happened to another person, people tend to attribute the failure to his or her disposition.

For example, you may attribute your own failure at the exam on the lack of sleep caused by your loud neighbours, whereas you may attribute the other person's failure to a lack of intelligence. Indeed, people tend to explain other people's behaviours as due to dispositional factors, but their own behaviours as due to situational factors. This is also known as the actor-observer effect. Similar to the fundamental attribution error, the actor-observer effect is very common and difficult to correct in people.

Slide 6
One thing that the fundamental attribution error and actor-observer effect do not describe, however, is what kind of attributions we make. For example, if your fellow student fails the exam, will you attribute this to a lack of effort or a lack of intelligence? Both are potential dispositional attributions, but which one will you make, and why?

The answer, in part, lies in stereotypes. People tend to make attributions that are consistent with the specific stereotypes that we hold about the group to which the person belongs. To illustrate how this works, let's go back to the example of Vincent Van Gogh, who allegedly cut off his own ear. Learning about this remarkable behaviour, what will we think of Van Gogh? Some of my own research has looked in these processes, and in particular how this makes us think of artists who exhibit uncommon behaviour.

Slide 7
The stereotype that people have of artists, like Van Gogh, is that they are creative geniuses who tend to be rather eccentric or bizarre. Thus, a prototypical artist, according to the stereotype, is one who is both unconventional and very creative.

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Slide 8
How does such a stereotype affect the way people make attributions? This was a question that we addressed in a series of experiments. What we did was the following-- we told one group of participants of the rather eccentric behaviour of Van Gogh cutting off his own ear. Another group of participants were not informed about this strange behaviour.

Next, we asked both groups of participants to evaluate some of Van Gogh's art-- for example, this painting called Sunflowers. Keep in mind that all participants evaluated the same paintings. The only difference was that some knew about Van Gogh's ear cutting and others did not.

What did we find? Well, those who were told about the eccentric behaviour of Van Gogh evaluated his art as more attractive than those who did not hear about the eccentric behaviour.

In other experiments with different artists, we found the same. For example, people found music created by Lady Gaga more beautiful when we showed them a photograph of Lady Gaga in a highly unusual outfit compared to when we showed them a photograph in which she wore regular clothes.

What is going on here? How can a clearly unimportant cue, such as an odd appearance or strange behaviour, make people evaluate art differently? And what does this say about attributions that people make?

Slide 9
The answer seems to lie in the use of stereotypes. First of all, remember that, according to the actor-observer effect and the fundamental attribution error, people tend to attribute behaviours to other's dispositions rather than the situation or the environment. What happens, therefore, is that when people see a strange behaviour-- such as cutting off an earlobe or wearing strange outfits-- they attribute this to the person's disposition. In particular, given that these people are artists, they make an inference that is guided by their stereotypes. Artists tend to be bizarre creatures according to the stereotype, therefore, so they infer, the behaviours indicate that Van Gogh and Lady Gaga must be eccentric persons.

So how does this personal attribution influence how we evaluate their art? Well, because the eccentric cues suggest to us that the persons in question are typical artists-- the real deal, so to speak-- people assume that their creations must therefore constitute real beautiful art.

What you see here is that the dispositional attributions are guided by stereotypes-- here, artists. The research that I just discussed is, of course, one example. There are many different contexts in which people use stereotypes as a basis for guiding their attributions. And whereas the art-related attributions may be relatively harmless, the fundamental attribution error and stereotype inferences may be highly problematic in other cases. For example, racist stereotypes can lead to very negative attributions, forgetting the importance of situational factors.

In the next lecture, we're going to take a different perspective. Specifically, whereas the last few lectures looked at general social cognition processes, the next lecture will discuss many of the processes that we looked at in context of autistic spectrum disorders. This talk will be given by Dr. Happé, who is an international expert on the topic.