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PSYC 210: Social Psychology

Homework Assignment #1

Current Directions Article #4: **A Social-Neuroscience Perspective on Empathy**

Authors: Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson

1. Explain each of the three components that are included in most definitions of empathy. Speculate on why these three components are so essential to the definition.

Affective Sharing Between Self and Others is the ability to emulate unconscious affective thoughts with another person. This can be shown through adopting a similar facial expression as another person. Adopting the Perspective of the Other is the ability to assume the viewpoint of other people by simulating others’ experiences and imagining their feelings in those experiences. A study by Ruby & Decety asked participants to think about how they would feel if they are faced with social situations that either affect them emotionally or not by showing them short descriptions about those situations. The study found that no matter how emotional a situation can induce, when the participants adopt their mothers’ views, they have regions of the brain that are concerned with perspective-taking process activated, and the same regions of the brain are activated in emotional situations for the self and the other. Self-Agency and Emotion Regulation is the ability to separate the feelings of self and other. When people engage in imagining the experience and feelings of others, parts of the brain that differentiate the perception of self from the others are triggered. Empathy refers to the ability to perceive and respond to the different emotional experiences of other individuals, which can either imply an unconscious sharing of emotions, or a similarity between our feelings based on our deliberate imagination of the others’ situations and their feelings (the first two components). However, their feelings do not belong to ourselves and we have to distinguish our own feelings from their feelings (the third component).

2. Explain how fMRI research has supported the finding that the more closely matched individuals are physiologically, the more accurate they are in perceiving each other’s feelings.

fMRI research has found the similarity between the expression and perception of the emotion of disgust, as destruction to the insula, a brain region that functions as a body state regulator, can worsen both the experience of disgust and perception of social cues that imply disgust. This means the same regions of the brain can trigger the expression and perception of disgust and one can understand the other’s feelings better if he/she has the same brain regions activated as the other person when putting himself/herself through the same position and imagining how the other person would feel. Another fMRI study asked participants to imagine themselves or other individuals to experience a painful or non-painful circumstances, then rate the level of perceived pain according to self- or other perspectives. For both perspectives, the neural network that involves pain processing is activated. Thus, the more closely matched individuals are physiologically, the more accurate they are in perceiving each other’s feelings.

3. The article represents the union of social psychology and neuroscience. Explain how the authors are taking a traditional social psychological phenomenal (i.e. empathy) and examining it from a neuroscience perspective. What are some of the potential advantages of examining empathy from this perspective? Explain.

The author explains empathy in terms of three components, each of which is examined through neurological perspective using fMRI which identifies which regions of the brain are activated when empathy in terms of each component is present. From this approach, we learn that similar regions of the brain are activated during both the experience and perception of the same emotions.

I think a neuroscience perspective provides concrete evidence to support the social psychological theories and perspectives of empathy, such as the activation of the same brain regions between ourselves and the others while we experience empathy with the others. From here we may have a more comprehensive understanding of why and how people have empathy, or lack empathy. Thus, this new perspective may also help us better understand and discover new methods to treat various mental disorders that involve the lack of empathy.

4. An explanation of how you can apply this research to your life.

I learned that reflecting on how I feel can enable me to perceive others’ feelings better, so I will try to be sensitive how I feel more often to be able to understand and empathize with others better.

Current Directions Article #5: **Weapon Bias: Split-Second Decisions and Unintended Stereotyping**

Authors: B. Keith Payne

1. Can stereotypes about race influence split second decisions? Use specific research from the article to defend your response. Be sure to include both research methodology and findings in your discussion.

The experiment in the article asked the participants to visually differentiate between guns and harmless objects while either flashed a black face or a white face. There are two different conditions: one group were told to respond at their own pace, to make a “snail” decision; the other group were told to respond within half a second on each round, to make a snap judgment. The accuracy was high for self-paced group, but participants respond faster when there was a black face. For the split-second decision group, participants wrongly identified an abject as a gun more often when there was a black face involved. Other studies also produce similar results; one study presented different pictures of black or white men holding either a gun or other harmless objects, then asked participants to shoot the ones holding guns only. All studies provide evidence that supports race bias in decision making and the results are even cross-culturally similar between African Americans and European Americans. Thus

stereotypes about race do influence split-second decisions by making them more inaccurate.

2. Describe the dual-process theory proposed by the author to account for the weapons bias. Explain how both factors contribute to this bias.

Dual-process theory explains how, when, why the automatic and controlled thoughts motivate our behavior. The first factor is stereotypic association, for example, people relates African Americans with violence and weapons. A study showed that people with more negative implicit attitudes towards African Americans have greater race weapons bias. But this does not mean that only automatic response is at play. There is a second factor that also impacts people’s response, the extent of control they have over their response. When people lose control over how they would behave, they would follow their automatic response, which leads to more weapons bias.

3. Discuss the influence of time pressure and self-regulation depletion on the weapons bias. Propose at least one other factor that might influence one’s ability to make accurate split-second decisions.

When individuals have to make a decision under time pressure, they are more likely to lose their control over their behaviors and rely on their automatic responses to make a decision. The similar situation happens with self-regulation depletion; as people have to self-regulate in one way, they are less likely to self-regulate themselves in other ways. For example, the Stroop color naming task that presents in non-matching font colors with word meaning requires lots of cognitive focus, which exhausts their control over their responses and thus leads to greater weapons bias. Another factor that might affect one’s control over their responses is error-related negativity (ERN), the ability to recognize discrepancies between the automatic and intended thoughts, is very important to establish cognitive control and limit the inaccuracies of split-second judgments as people with ERN have the least number of false weapon claims.

4. An explanation of how you can apply this research to your life.

Knowing about what triggers weapon bias can help us reduce the bias by either gradually changing our stereotypes or controlling our thoughts better. Getting exposed to as much diversity as possible, I think, is a great way to understand people from different races and abandoning our prejudices about them. In Earlham, I meet with and listen to stories of people from diverse backgrounds and it helps me getting rid of any prejudices about them. I also think people need to be aware of their automatic stereotypical response and it can be different from their intended response, so that they can be more cautious with their snap judgments and think twice before assuming anything about a person from another race.