SOCI 323
Social Psychology

Session 9 – SOCIAL PERCEPTION

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Session Overview

This session seeks to explain the relatively complex process of self-perception and impression formation and management. We examine how the individual comes to know himself or herself. Again we use the classical Central Trait theory by Solomon Asch (1946) to explain how the individual is able to form and manage impressions.

At the end of the session, the student will be able to:

- explain the process of self- perception
- understand and explain how the knowledge obtained of self, aids in the formation of impressions
- explain the role of central traits in the formation of impressions
- explain the order effects on impression formation
- explain the strategies individuals employ to manage impressions

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Social Perception

- The Central Trait Theory

- Impression Formation

- Impression Management

- Sample Question

- Session Summary

- References

Reading List

- Read chapter three (3) of the required text and the article on session 9 posted on Sakai

Topic One

IMPRESSION FORMATION

What is Impression Formation?

- Impression formation basically is the process through which we combine diverse information about others into a unified impression about them.

- "The process by which one integrates various sources of information about another into and overall judgment" (Franzoi).

- "The processes by which observers integrate various sources of information about others' self presentations into a unified and consistent judgment" (Hamilton and Sherman 1996).

- Impression formation is a dynamic process- with judgments being continually updated in response to new **thin-slices** of information. Impression formation is also integrative- that is each bit of information is interpreted within the context of all other information you have about a person. Thus each information 'bit' takes its character from the other 'bits' as a whole.

Topic Two

THE CENTRAL TRAIT THEORY

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What is the Central Trait Theory?

- This theory is one of the earliest proposed by Solomon Asch (1946) to explain how impressions are formed. The theory holds that certain personality characteristics are of particular importance in determining how you perceive other individuals. These personality characteristic are called central traits.

- Central traits are traits that exert a disproportionate influence on peoples overall impression, causing them to assume the presence of other traits. The significance of a trait also depends on its context. For example, if students were waiting to listen to two speakers at a forum and these speakers were described differently as follows;

➢ Speaker A: Intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm, practical, cautious
➢ Speaker B: Intelligent, skillful, industrious, Cold, practical and cautious,

- Which of these two will receive a more favorable assessment? Based on research findings, Asch concluded that **warm** and **cold** are traits that significantly influence overall impression formation.

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Topic Three

ORDER EFFECTS IN IMPRESSION FORMATION

The Primacy Effect

- The order in which you receive information about personality traits, influence the impressions you form. If positive information comes first, you are likely to form positive impressions and make excuses for the negatives that follow. If negative information comes first, they hold. First impressions tend to last forever.

- The theory- that the first information received is the most influential is known as the *PRIMARY EFFECT.* Primary effect occurs because of three things.

- The first is the **change of meaning effect**; the situation when information you receive first influences the meaning you attach to later information.

- Secondly, the primacy effect occurs because of **attention decrement**. Attention decrement occurs when after paying close attention to first information you lose interest and pay less attention to subsequent information. Thus, the situation where you have the basic information you need to form an impression and so ignore later data.

- Lastly the primacy effect results from the **discounting hypothesis**. This is where you discount information that does not agree with earlier information you received.

Recency Effect

- Some researchers (Stewart 1965) have portrayed that the latter impressions may have a great impact on our overall judgment.

- Recency effects occur when subjects are asked to make a separate evaluation after each new piece of information has been presented.

- Also when subjects are warned not to make hasty impressions but to wait and rather use later (recency)) information to form impressions.

- Also when there is a time lag between the presentation of trait information and the time of making the judgment.

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Topic Four

SELF PERCEPTION

Self Perception

- In social perception we attempt to understand others. A point of equal importance is the need to understand and know ourselves. Though may appear simple, it is a complex process.

- It is quite difficult to evaluate our own traits and abilities. Sometimes we act in ways that we cannot explain or do not understand. Most of the information we have about ourselves are obtained from people around us. Thus, we learn much about ourselves (pain, fear and anger) from others- external sources (Schacter et al 1964).

- Observations of our own behavior will act as clues to understanding ourselves. Thus, we rely on our own behavior to infer feelings and attitudes about ourselves –'If I behaved this way, then I may have a feeling and attitude consistent with that behavior'.

Introspection

- Introspection is the process whereby people look inward and examine their own thoughts feelings and motives'. Introspection aids in self discovery and in self definition. Research (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982) suggests that though humans occasionally introspect, the self is rarely the focus of people's attention. People tend to focus more on mundane things such as jobs, children, house chores, cars, conversation etc.

- The focus on the self tends to come to the fore when an individual becomes self aware or becomes the object of his own attention. For instance, if you observe yourself in a mirror, television or movie,. you have the opportunity to focus on you, to assess and judge yourself.

Outcomes of Introspection

- Introspection via self awareness has two outcomes; you could feel good about yourself or bad about yourself. The latter experience often leads to the situation where people attempt to escape from themselves. But how do you escape from yourself?

- Consider the following example - If you believe that exercise is critical to a good health, yet you do not exercise, you are likely to feel bad when you have the opportunity to see yourself in a mirror and observe how fat you have become. The reserve is also true.

- Despite this gloomy picture, escaping from the self can also be positive. Many people have found solace and peace in several forms of religious and spiritual expressions. Self focus or introspection can also be positive if you use it to dwell on some achievement or positive experience you have had. This tends to encourage and spur you on in life.

- Self focus through introspection also helps in maintaining your standards because introspection constantly brings to the fore your values and beliefs, which subsequently influences your behavior.

Observations of Own Behaviour

- Introspection is limited in explaining our moods as most explanations of our mood result from causal theories (obtained through socialization) and not exactly from the self. Thus, other sources of knowing the self such as observing our behavior are useful.

- The self perception theory (Bem, 1972) explains how observations of our own behavior provide self knowledge. The self perception theory simply explains that when your **attitudes and feelings are uncertain or ambiguous**, you infer these states by **observing your behavior** and **the situation in which it occurs.**

- First, the theory suggests that you will seek knowledge of yourself by observing your behavior when you are not sure of your feelings and or attitude.

- Secondly, people observe to see whether the context or situation influenced their behavior in anyway.

Social Comparison

- The social comparison theory explains how you can know learn about your traits and abilities by comparing yourself to other people. With social comparison, two key questions come up namely; (**1) when do you engage in social comparison and (2) with whom do you compare yourself.**

- In relation to the first question, you compare yourself with others when there is no standard for people to use in measuring themselves.

- Now to know with whom to compare yourself will depend on your motive. Usually you will compare yourself with others who are similar to you when you want an accurate assessment of your abilities.

- However if your motive is to gain an insight of how well you could develop, you may engage in an upward social comparison. An upward social comparison is comparing yourself to people who are better than you in certain traits or abilities.

- Sometimes, you can engage in downward social comparison and this often occurs if your motive is to boost your ego, and enhance your image. Downward social comparison is when people compare themselves with others who are worse than them on a particular trait or ability.

Self Perception through others' lens

- We can also assess our views of the social world by comparing them to those of our friends and acquaintances.

- According to Charles Cooley's (1902) **"looking glass self'** we see the world through the eyes of those with whom we interact. We often do these so we can get along with others.

- This tendency is termed **social tuning**-adapting to the views of others so we can be accepted by them. Social tuning can be conscious or unconscious.

Topic Four

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

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What is Impression Management?

- This refers to the attempt by people to get others to see them as they want to be seen (Aronson et al, 2007).

- Baron et al (2006) define impression management as the efforts by individuals to produce favorable first impressions on others.

- Many people, for instance politicians create impressions of themselves to the electorate to get their vote. If you perceive the electorate to be religious, then you may want to present yourself as God-fearing etc to win their favour and votes.

- We all seek to make good impression in job interviews, on first dates and in many other contexts.

- Though individual adopt several strategies to enhance their image, these fall into two major categories namely, **Self-enhancement** (self handicapping) and **other-enhancement** (ingratiation).

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Self Enhancement

- This refers to the tendency to focus on and present positive information about oneself and to minimize negative information.

- With self enhancement efforts include specific strategies to boost physical appearance through personal grooming, style of dressing and wearing the hair, efforts to point to one's intelligence and abilities by speaking highly of oneself etc.

- One self enhancement strategy that has received much research attention is **self handicapping**. Self handicapping is a strategy for protecting one's self esteem by calling attention to the existence of external causes for potential failures.

- It is the process of seeking to introduce a degree of uncertainty into the situation by alluding to other possible causes.

- Self handicapping is common with socially anxious people and individuals who are highly concerned with public opinion and the need to maintain a good public image. Self handicapping can distort perceptions in social reality.

Self Handicapping

- There are two ways in which people self- handicap:

- First you can create obstacles that reduce the likelihood that you will succeed on a task such that should you fail, you can blame it on these obstacles rather than your lack of ability. These obstacles could include reduced effort on tasks, failure to prepare for a task and sometimes substance abuse, drugs and alcohol.

- The second way to self handicap is by creating obstacles to success. In other words you can set up excuses before the fact, just in case you do poorly.

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Other Enhancement

- These involve efforts to make the target person feel good. Other enhancement strategies are varied with the most common one being **ingratiation**- the use of flatter and praise to generally make yourself likeable to another person often of a higher status.

- With ingratiation, you could praise the talents, abilities and accomplishments of your target person. These tactics are often successfully provided they are skillfully done.

- If they are overdone, or not done skillfully, they could backfire resulting in the **slime effect.** The **slime effect** is the tendency to form negative impressions of others who play up to their superiors but who treat their subordinates with disdain.

- In the process you rather gain a negative self impression as a 'boot licker' if you overdo or wrongly ingratiate.

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Why Impression Management

- Though people engage in impression management to enhance others impressions of them, the process also holds benefits for the individual seeking to manage impressions.

- Impression management tends to boost the moods of people who attempt to appear happy and positive.

- This is as a result of the **facial feedback hypothesis** which suggests that we do not only show what we feel in our facial expressions, but, these expression actually influence our emotional state.

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Sample Question

- 'First impressions last long'. Provide a theoretical basis and reasoning for this statement.

Session Summary

- This session has explained the concept and process of self perception. We learnt that introspections and knowledge from others cumulatively help us to know ourselves

- Impression formation and management are both processes that involve the use of several strategies. These processes are effective to the extent that these strategies are used properly.

References

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