Social cognition, attribution and social influence

Supported GRE teaching and original transfer practice

Social cognition, attribution and social influence

- Explain **attribution** and its typical biases.
- Separate **normative influence** from **informational influence**, and **conformity** from **obedience**.
- Explain **cognitive dissonance**.
- Use the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion.

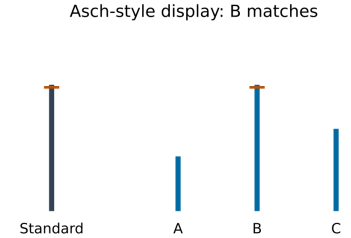
Attribution

- **Fundamental attribution error** : explaining other people's behaviour too much by their character and too little by their situation.
- Actor–observer difference: we explain our own actions more by the situation.
- Self-serving bias: we credit our successes to ourselves and blame failures on circumstances.
- An action tells us most about a person when it was freely chosen and unusual for the situation.

Conformity and obedience

- **Normative influence**: going along to be accepted or to avoid rejection, as in Asch's studies.
- **Informational influence**: going along because others seem to know better, especially when the situation is unclear.
- Obedience is following a direct order from an authority. In Stanley Milgram's 1963 study, 65% of participants continued to what they believed was a 450-volt shock when told to by the experimenter.
- Conformity is pressure from equals; obedience is pressure from an authority.

Figure: Conformity and obedience



Stimulus schematic; the drawing does not measure conformity.

- The correct answer is unambiguous, so any conforming errors come from social pressure
- Match each part of the diagram to the text.

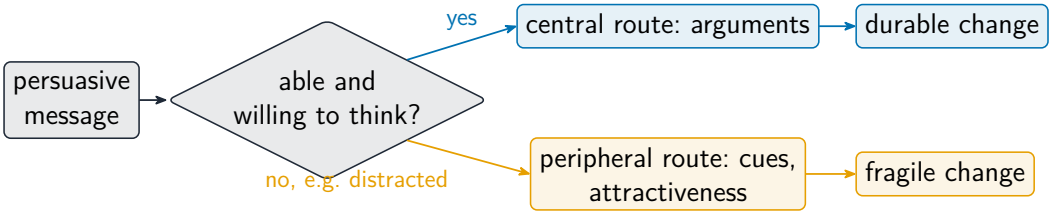
Cognitive dissonance

- In Festinger and Carlsmith's 1959 study, students paid $1 to tell others a boring task was fun later rated it as more enjoyable than students paid $20.
- With little outside justification, people change their attitudes to fit their behaviour.

Persuasion

- Central route: the strength of the arguments decides. Change lasts and predicts behaviour.
- Peripheral route: cues such as attractiveness, fame or the number of arguments decide. Change is weaker and fades.
- Distraction, low interest or time pressure push people to the peripheral route.

Figure: Persuasion



- The elaboration likelihood model's two routes.
- Match each part of the diagram to the text.

The self

- Self-monitoring: adjusting how we present ourselves to fit the situation.
- Self-verification: seeking feedback that confirms what we already believe about ourselves.
- Self-affirmation: after a threat, restoring self-worth by thinking about a strength in another area.
- Excitation transfer: leftover arousal from one event (exercise, a near-accident) makes a later emotion stronger.

Worked example: two kinds of influence

- If they follow because they think the group knows the way: **informational influence**.
- If they follow to avoid looking odd: **normative influence**.
- The same action can come from different processes. Answering privately or anonymously usually reduces normative conformity but not informational conformity, which helps tell them apart.

Worked example: attributions

- The teacher made the **fundamental attribution error**.
- The student is likely to explain the lateness by the bus, the situation: the actor–observer difference.
- A better judgement checks consistency: is the student late often, and are other students on that bus late too?

Common errors

- Merging conformity (equals) and obedience (authority).
- Treating every trait-based explanation as an error; the error is ignoring the situation.
- Expecting larger rewards to produce more attitude change in dissonance studies.

Common errors (2)

- Assuming peripheral-route persuasion lasts as long as central-route change.
- Forgetting that one dissenter strongly reduces conformity.

Key terms

- **attribution**: Explaining the cause of behaviour, by the person or by the situation.
- **fundamental attribution error**: Over-explaining others' behaviour by their character while neglecting the situation.
- **normative influence**: Conforming to be accepted or to avoid rejection.
- **informational influence**: Conforming because others' behaviour seems to show what is correct.

Check yourself

- A tourist copies locals' behaviour in an unfamiliar temple. Which influence is this, most likely?
- In dissonance studies, which group changes its attitude more: those paid little or those paid a lot?
- A tired, distracted viewer is persuaded by a famous face in an advert. Which route is this?