

Book review

Social Cognition, Marilyn B. Brewer, Miles J. Hewstone (Eds.);
Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 368 pages

Action Editor: Stefan Wermter

Richa Yadav

13724, 11th ST NE Apt Q-7, Bellevue, WA 98005, USA

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Social cognition is a collection of readings from the four-volume set of Blackwell Handbooks of Social Psychology which examines the mental representations of social world and the people process social information. It provides relevant case studies and theory on social cognition that is both comprehensive and current and cross-cuts the levels of analysis from intrapersonal to intergroup. The book discusses a wide array of topics such as attitude, perceptual perception, mental representation, memory processing of social information, emotions and stereotypes. Brewer and Hewstone have captured both the expansiveness and conceptual depth of the social cognition. Each paper is followed by a list of reference after the summary and conclusion of the paper being discussed.

As social cognition is a study of social information processing, that is, how events and experiences are attended to, encoded, stored in memory and later retrieved for social behavior, the authors have organized the selected reading for this volume around two broad themes. The first part deals with the cognitive representations of the social world and the second part deals with the cognition in social interaction. It shows how cognition takes place and develops within social relationships and other forms of social exchange.

There is a gamut of schemes and patterns while we construe reality instead of passively registering our environment. The book unfolds an interesting view that individuals are ‘cognitive optimizers’, that is to say, they have access to a variety of information and they use these selectively in the service of a range of processing objectives and motivations. The first chapter gives a review of basic assumptions regarding representation formation and use. It compares two types of representations – the associative and schema representation. Whereas associative represen-

tations focus on the acquisition of new knowledge and its use, schema model emphasizes the use of existing general knowledge. The chapter suggests that in social psychology, schema is a description of a function that can be performed by a learned knowledge representation. The Connectionist model is judged as the best for mental representation as it offers a possibility of broad integration of various areas of cognition. Interesting research has been discussed by M.R. Banaji, K.M. Lemm and S.J. Carpenter which shows that who one is and how one assesses oneself can implicitly influence views of others, just as significant others and social groups can influence judgments of self. For instance, threat to self-image can automatically activate stereotypes of social groups even under conditions that otherwise do not produce such activation. The authors also explore the possibilities of controlling unconscious stereotypes. The suggestion is to create new social conditions that allow new associations and new learning. Recent studies in priming are also discussed. It brings out that priming depends on the type of knowledge structure activated, the timing of the activation and the motivation level and mental set of the participants. A chapter on cognitive representation of attachment reviews recent theories to explain how one’s past experience guides one in interacting with others. Collins and Allard argue that attachment theory places greater emphasis on the representation of motivational elements like needs and goals.

The book presents a very interesting alternative view on intergroup relations. Peneople Oakes argues that as our self-definition in a social context always depends upon social categorization, therefore, it should feature centrally in understanding of intergroup processes in social psychology. Categorization works to align the person with the realities of the social context and helps individuals in

self-definition and self-reference. Another paper on stereotypes advances two core principles derived from a review of this literature. First, stereotypes contain both negative and positive attributes about social groups, and thus their potency is largely determined by the social context within which they arise. Second, stereotypes are an inherent byproducts of the human cognitive system, yet controllable with personal motivation and effort. The authors show that both the principles are interconnected. Here they address the content, the cognitive structure, the process and the context of stereotypes. It is argued that the content of stereotype follows general psychological principles. Authors also explore the nature of cognitive structures to understand how stereotypes draw support from basic mental architecture. Authors survey four major social cognitive approaches, i.e. prototype, exemplar, and associative network and connectionist models of mental representation. Prototype models posit that people represent categorical information in fuzzy sets, i.e. attributes about the category have no definite boundaries or systematic organizing criteria. This kind is strongest when perceivers have little direct experience with the category yet possesses strong group expectancies. Exemplar models emphasize the role of concrete examples in mental representation and are based on actual experience with category members. So perceivers compare target individuals with mental representations of actual category members when forming impressions and judgments. Network models suggest that all the knowledge and experience are cognitively represented and organized by interlinked nodes.

R.S. Tindale and others have argued that shared cognition in small group is a result of shared interpretations based on collective meanings. Through interactions with others we learn the beliefs and attitudes ‘given’ in our environment. Thus social representations are learned through a combination of social consensus and subsequent experience biased by social perception. Moscovici’s and Tajfel’s theories have been discussed in detail. The detailed literature review brings out that shared cognition is a fundamental feature of group life. Information is selectively weighted and processed in order to clarify intergroup distinctiveness. The authors have even touched upon a relatively young area in research as ‘Bandura’s notion of collective efficacy. It stands for a group’s shared beliefs in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce levels of attainment. A chapter on group processes and social representation suggests that mission of social representation theory is to fulfill this gap between our knowledge of the cognitive and the meta cognitive aspects of social behavior.

Social cognition is not confined to social relationships and groups but it also develops within the context of social relationships, social groups and other form of social intercourse. The other half of the book shifts focus from the content and structure of social cognition to the functional relationships between cognition and social interaction.

Attributions play a key role in relationship events, often being implicated in causal sequence. A further new direction that shows promise views attribution as part of people’s natural stories, narratives, or accounts relating to their relationships. A plethora of other strands of work are evolving with attribution as a central construct. The book brings out an updated review of this field which points out gaps in the marital attributional literature and pointed out ways in which these new avenues of inquiry must be reviewed.

A paper on cognition and development of close relation gives valuable directions for further research. It discusses close relationship in its three main facets – the content of cognition, i.e. the beliefs and values that define the mental makeup, the structure of cognition, that is, how relationship relevant knowledge is organized and the process, i.e. the pursuit, integration and assimilation of knowledge. It is argued that these three categories are not mutually exclusive but merely as a guide to this broad and complex literature. The paper does not however, talk about how the three are different and how each facet of cognition influences the other. It is more challenging to study close relationship under this framework because such research requires a different repertoire of methods than are commonly employed in research on close relationships. Understanding cognition in general is coming up with a general workings of a human minds, but when the same method is involved for close relations, it is difficult to explain because the raw data will be more or less just the content, i.e. the beliefs of the individuals. Content cannot help further in explaining how content is structured, how it functions and organizes itself. And as the book brings out, complexity and accessibility of beliefs and evaluations are two important dimensions of cognitive structure research. Some beliefs and values are relatively inaccessible. That is to say that certain aspects of cognition are difficult to bring to mind, therefore, such cognitive aspects are less likely to affect the interpretations of new data. How are individual differences explained? The paper shows that cognitive content affects how an individual interprets and responds to specific experiences, and that relatively accessible cognitions will exert a greater effect than relatively inaccessible ones. How the cognitive processes operate has not been explained. And such processing will never be rational; it will be biased, driven by individual desires and aspirations.

Language is another significant factor in social cognition. Language is used as a device by which we strategically present aspects of reality or an idea in communication in order to influence or shape the social cognitive process of the recipient to a message. There are three different levels of analysis adopted in the examination of the language–cognition interface in the light of distinction between the structural properties of language and language use, namely, the individual centered, transformational and socially distributed approaches to language and social cognition. On first level, language is regarded as an abstract set

of rules and relationship between linguistic properties and cognitive properties is examined. The second level of analysis relies on the assumption that language is a medium for practical activity. This level of analysis requires both an understanding of the structural properties of language and the situated purposes that they serve. On the third level, the focus is on how language as practical activity is deployed in context that requires the reproduction of new structures as well as their situated realization. Various interesting arguments are reviewed. For instance, the linguistic relativism argument which holds that differences in linguistic categories across languages influences individuals' habitual thought patterns. The challenge is to integrate these three aspects. The book also reviews literature on how social groups play a major role in attitude formation, attitude behavior consistency and attitude change. The suggestion is that groups have the largest influence on attitude when group identities are important, relevant and salient.

Social cognition is not a content area, but rather is an approach to understanding social psychology. It is a level of analysis that aims to understand social psychological phenomena by investigating the cognitive processes that underlie them. From this point of view, the book comes so handy. It shows ways in which diverse scholarly perspectives can blend to provide insight into areas of common interest. It is designed for course use. This level of analysis may be applied to any content area within social psychology, including research on intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup processes. The book throws

new light on many classic social-psychological theories. The social cognition research reviewed in this book is rich and diverse containing a multitude of insights about a broad variety of topics. Yet there are some unifying themes which are repeated throughout the book, particularly the idea that our understanding of social world is influenced by our concepts, beliefs, theories and attitudes and vice versa.

The papers reviewed in this book highlight the importance of assessing multiple aspects of social cognition and also give various clues for future research throughout the book, which makes it invaluable for beginners working in this area. However, the authors have not discussed the topic of concept formation elaborately although it is considered one of the basic tenets of thought and cognition. The papers on language and cognition could have been more extensive and illuminating. Enormous work has been done in this area and it is primary for social cognition. Another major problem with the material provided by the book is that it reviews the literature but does not critically evaluate all social cognition theories. Social cognition has recently emerged as a subfield of social psychology and is giving far fetched consequences in understanding and resolving social problems. There has been an enormous influx of studies in recent years in the area. However, as most of the studied discussed in the book are done before 2000, there is a need to separately look at more recent studies done after 2000. Thus, the book although is not complete in itself, yet, can be considered as one of the major books in the area of social cognition.