



CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

The study of social cognition concerns how people make sense of other people and themselves. It focuses on people's everyday understanding both as the phenomenon of interest and as a basis for theory about people's everyday understanding. Thus it concerns both how people think about the social world and how they think they think about the social world. It also draws heavily on fine-grained analyses provided by cognitive theory and method.

Solomon Asch first proposed two competing models for social perception, one more algebraic and the other more configural. These two contrasting approaches to social cognition date back to early modern philosophy. The elemental approach begins with ideas as elements that become linked in increasingly complex compounds. People form associations between ideas by the ideas' repeated contiguity in space or time. Early psychologists used introspective analysis as a method to break down their memory processes into those basic elements.

Gestalt psychologists adopted a holistic approach. They focused on the mind's active construction of reality rather than on objective descriptions of the stimulus field. They also focused on the person's experience of dynamic wholes rather than elements. Lewin and Asch imported such ideas to social psychology. As noted, Asch focused on Gestalt impressions. Lewin emphasized that the whole perceived environment – that is, the psychological field – predicts behavior and that one must consider the entire dynamic equilibrium of forces acting on an individual. The psychological field is the joint product of person and situation, and of motivation and cognition.

Cognition has not always been prominent in experimental psychology. When introspection proved to be a weak basis for an empirical science, cognition fell into disfavor with psychologists. Behaviorists dominated psychology for decades, insisting on an observable stimulus, an observable response, and no intervening cognitions. Later, behaviorist approaches seemed inadequate to explain language; at the same time, information-processing theories and computer-aided theory and technology paved the way for the re-emergence of cognition in experimental psychology.

In social psychology, however, cognition has always been a respectable idea. The causes of social interaction predominantly lie in the perceived world, and the results of social interaction are thoughts as well as feelings and behavior. In addition, social psychologists have always been cognitive in their view of the thinker who reacts to the perceived stimulus and generates a substantially cognitive response. They have viewed the

social thinker at some times as a consistency seeker, motivated to reduce perceived discrepancies; at other times, they have seen the social thinker as a naive scientist who makes every effort to ferret out the truth, with motivation contributing mainly error. Subsequently, social psychologists regarded the social thinker as a cognitive miser who attempts to increase or maintain the efficiency of a capacity-limited cognitive apparatus, and they had little to say about motivation. This viewpoint was followed by a view of the social perceiver as a motivated tactician, which gained acceptance as researchers documented the flexibility of the social perceiver. Currently, with emphasis shifting to ever-faster, more immediate responses, as well as their effects on overt behavior, researchers tend to emphasize social perceivers as activated actors, heavily influenced by social environments.

Social cognition, as an area of study, emphasizes unabashed mentalism, social settings, cross-fertilization, and real-world social issues. Social cognition departs from the general principles of cognition in some ways: Compared to objects, people are more likely to be causal agents, to perceive as well as being perceived, and to involve intimately the observer's self. People are difficult targets of cognition; because they adjust themselves upon being perceived, many of their important attributes (e.g., traits) must be inferred, and the accuracy of observations is difficult to determine. People frequently change and are unavoidably complex as targets of cognition. Hence those who study social cognition must adapt the ideas of cognitive psychology to suit the specific features of cognitions about people.

Some of the most exciting recent developments include work on social cognitive affective neuroscience, adding to insights about the special status of emphatically social cognition at the neural level, with particular systems implicated in distinctly social cognitive processes. Complementing that work are insights from cultural psychology, examining variations in the way humans solve the challenge of making sense of each other in a variety of settings.