5.7: Chapter Summary

What we learned so far

Person perception helps us make accurate and informed judgments about how other people are likely to respond to us. At the same time, we are exercising our person perception skills on other people, those same people are also using their powers of person perception to form impressions of us.

Our initial impressions of other people can be formed quite accurately in a very short time—sometimes in a matter of seconds. These initial judgments are made on the basis of the other person’s social category memberships—such as race, gender, and age—and their physical appearance.

Another source of information in initial perception is nonverbal behavior. We use a wide variety of nonverbal cues to help us form impressions of others. These behaviors are also useful in helping us determine whether people are being honest with us. Although our ability to detect deception is often not very good, there are nevertheless some reliable cues that we can use to do so.

Once we learn more about a person, we begin to think about that person in terms of their personality traits. Often we average traits together to form an overall impression of the person. Some traits have more weight than others—for instance, negative traits, the central traits of warm and cold, and those traits that we learn first.

An important task of person perception is to attempt to draw inferences about a person’s personality by observing his or her behavior. This is the process of causal attribution. When we make attributions, we make either personal attributions, situational attributions, or both.

We can make stronger personal attributions when behavior is unusual or unexpected and when it is freely chosen.
When we have information about behavior over time, we can analyze the consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus of that behavior to make attributions. In some cases, we may use the process of causal attribution to draw conclusions about the causes of success and failure.

Our attributions are generally accurate, but they are subject to some biases. We tend to make too many personal attributions for the behavior of others (the fundamental attribution error), and we make more personal attributions for others than we do for ourselves (the actor-observer effect). In some cases, this may lead us to blame others for events that they might not have been responsible for. Furthermore, we tend to make self-serving attributions, which are frequently inaccurate but which do help us to meet our needs for self-enhancement. We also make a variety of attributions that favor our ingroups over our outgroups (e.g., the group-serving bias) and ones that can lead us to blame people for their misfortunes (e.g., the just world hypothesis).

There are important cultural differences in person perception. People from individualistic cultures, or people for whom an individualistic culture is currently highly accessible, tend to make stronger personal attributions and weaker situational attributions in comparison with people from collectivistic cultures. They also tend to show more self-serving and group-serving biases.

Different individuals make different judgments about others, in part because they see those people in different circumstances and in part because they use their own attitudes and schemas when they judge them. This can lead people to make more similar judgments about different people than different people make about the same person. Individual difference variables such as need for cognition and entity versus incremental thinking can also influence our person perception.

Causal attributions for our own behaviors have an important outcome on our mental and physical health. For example, whereas a negative attributional style has been linked to depression, a positive attributional style can act as a protective factor against it. Ultimately, finding a balance between positive and realistic explanations of our own behavior appears to be very important to our well-being.

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