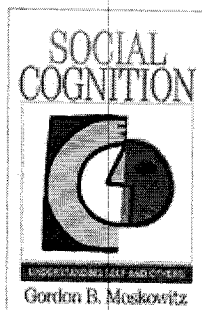**PsycCRITIQUES**

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY: APA REVIEW OF BOOKS   *American Psycholo*

Cognition Without Reason: A Farewell to the Cognitive Revolution

A review of

Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others
by Gordon B. Moskowitz
New York: Guilford Press, 2005.
612 pp. ISBN 1-59385-086-7
(hardcover); 1-59385-085-9
(paperback). $80.00,
hardcover; $40.00, paperback

Reviewed by
Joachim I. Krueger
Theresa E. DiDonato

For a quarter of a century, the field of social cognition has been at the center of social psychology and has been an inspiration to neighboring disciplines. It is surprising that relatively few book-length treatments of the subject have been published. Gordon B. Moskowitz's new text, *Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others*, is now the only up-to-date presentation of the field.

Moskowitz defines social cognition as "the study of the mental processes involved in perceiving, attending to, remembering, thinking about, and making sense of people in our social world" (p. 3). Humans are famously complicated and thus much harder to understand or predict than animals or artifacts. One could argue that humans' own mental equipment should also be complex if they are to understand one another. Researchers have devised numerous ingenious techniques to uncover the processes underlying social perception. Nonetheless,

their overriding construals of the social
perceiver are still metaphorical.

Metaphors

In the early days, there was little room for
social cognition. In his classic text, Floyd
Allport (1924) presented a behaviorist
framework for experimental social psychology.
In due course, Allport's vision was opposed
and revised by those who sought to bring back
a focus on thinking. Heider's (1958) departure
from behaviorism is particularly noteworthy
because it contained two assumptions that still
guide some, if not most, work in the field. One
assumption was that the study of folk
psychology can provide a window into ordinary
social cognition; the other assumption was
that basic Gestalt principles can be applied to
social perception.

Moskowitz's review is sensitive to this
history, citing Gordon Allport, Bruner, Heider,
and Ichheiser at length. Going back even
further, Moskowitz explores how certain
themes of contemporary theorizing are
anchored in the works of empiricist and
pragmatist philosophers. There is a sense that,
even today, it is impossible to approach social
cognition without certain a priori philosophical
commitments. Are we to view humans as
creatures who are primarily motivated to learn
about themselves and others as best they can
(i.e., as natural empiricists), or are we to view
them as creatures whose perceptions primarily
serve their subjective well-being (i.e., as
natural pragmatists)?

Neither philosophical view seems to fully
capture how people think about the social
world. With respect to empiricism, Moskowitz
observes that people fail to meet scientific
standards. Instead, they operate as naive
realists who mistakenly think they directly
perceive reality the way it is. The notion of
naive realism emerged from research on

judgmental heuristics and biases, which had already generated the metaphor of the cognitive miser (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Reasoning by shortcut maneuvers rather than by careful analysis, the cognitive miser born again as a naive realist makes so many mistakes and is beset by so many illusions that a review of the research amounts to "a laundry list of all the sorts of nonrational things that perceivers do when making sense of themselves and others" (p. 350). Seeing people as pragmatists does not yield a more optimistic view. Here, Moskowitz emphasizes the role of active construal processes, suggesting that "we actively twist and fit every piece of information we receive in a way that allows us to meet the needs driving social perception" (p. 312). The relevant metaphor for this theme is that of the motivated tactician, which Fiske and Taylor (1991) introduced in the second edition of their seminal text and which Kunda (1999) further elaborated.

≋ The theme of misperception binds empiricism and pragmatism together in contemporary social cognition. Moskowitz notes the sad fact "that much of our experience of the world is a distortion" (p. 24). It is easy to overlook the philosophical antagonism between these two orientations. Peirce (1905) and James (1907), for example, took the pragmatic stance in part because it enabled them to believe in things for which there is little evidence (e.g., God, free will). This did not sit well with Bertrand Russell (1972), who noted that the pragmatic mind could also justify the belief in Santa Claus with the pleasant feelings it causes. In social cognition, it is difficult to see how people can be both naive realists and active construers of their environment, so the naive (mis) perception of social reality and its deliberate (mis)construal are the two attractors between which research oscillates. Although Moskowitz grants that "we humans are cognitively

flexible, efficient, and adaptive" (p. 192), his review largely ignores recent work on judgmental accuracy and on how even the most naive or miserly heuristics can yield passable and often even excellent results.

With this in mind and Russell's (1972) critique notwithstanding, construals are not necessarily detrimental. Consider framing effects. When a decision is framed as a choice between a small gain that is certain and a large gain that is merely probable, most people prefer the sure gain. When the same decision is framed as a choice between a certain small loss and a large probabilistic loss, most people take the risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). The canonical interpretation is that these preferences are incoherent and thus irrational. Harking back to Gestalt psychology, however, one may say that one of the two construals (or frames) is necessary for a choice to be made. Finding that different construals produce different preferences is not indicative of an illusion. A more appropriate visual analogy is the Necker cube, which is a multistable figure that can be seen in one of two ways but not both ways at the same time. Although they differ from each other, both perceptions are valid interpretations of an underspecified reality. This is not a poor simile for perception in the social world, as exemplified by the paradigm of the ubiquitous but ambiguous Donald in the impression-formation literature.

Two Systems or One?

Two-system theories of reasoning are currently a popular vehicle for the study of intuitive versus normative reasoning. Intuitive reasoning is largely automatic (System 1), whereas rule-based reasoning is more controlled (System 2). However, a simple equation of System 1 with poor reasoning and System 2 with normative reasoning no longer seems viable. Both systems have unique

advantages and shortcomings. An emerging question is how two-system theories can account for the role of the second attractor, perceptual construal. On the one hand, construal suggests deliberate and motivated thinking. On the other hand, construals can work furtively through System 1. As Moskowitz puts it, "We rarely recognize the perceptual distortions and inferences that we often make" (p. 23).

As more studies emerge showing that mental processes assumed to be characteristic of System 2 can also be run by System 1, the dichotomy of automatic versus controlled cognition dissipates. Indeed, the bulk of Moskowitz's book is concerned with various types of accessibility effects. Following the New Look in perception, many investigators assume that the mind is a repository of constructs that can be activated by proper environmental stimulation. When made accessible, these constructs affect social perception in a number of ways, usually by leading to the assimilation of a new percept to an activated construct and sometimes by leading to contrast effects. These effects can occur without conscious mediation, that is, they occur when one would have thought that they could not.

The volume and the recency of work on automaticity (or implicit cognition, more generally) suggest another shift. Whereas research on heuristics and biases and research on idiosyncratic stimulus construals challenged the primacy of the reasoning mind, the current emphasis on automaticity makes one wonder whether there is a reasoning mind at all. Automaticity can be found in places where it is least expected—for example, in goal-directed behavior. If awareness is unnecessary for purposive behavior, it plays no causal role. People may become aware of their own intention to blow a bubble before they blow it, but this experienced intention is

epiphenomenal.

Moskowitz seems torn on this issue. He points out that in the famous Libet (1985) studies on voluntary motion, participants had at some point a conscious goal to move a finger. He concludes, however, that "there simply is no need for consciousness to be invoked for goal regulation to occur. In this sense, control is not the opposite of determinism" (p. 106). With the dichotomy of automatic versus controlled cognition slipping away, one might still claim that thinking is controlled if it is slow, inefficient, and tiring. But what purpose does such an ascription serve if one must ultimately concede that even slow and effortful thinking depends on prior automatisms? Do we really need to invoke a second reasoning system? And, if not, why do we experience certain kinds of thinking as a strain?

Thought Versus Thinking

As in any book, the last chapter has high diagnostic value; it tells the reader what the author has learned from the reviewed work and what he most wants the reader to remember. Moskowitz anchors his epilogue on William James's (1907) pragmatic stance that thinking is for doing. The doing is often vile, as exemplified by the Stanford prison study; the thinking, when it does occur, is often flawed. "People operate with false assumptions," says Moskowitz (p. 516), but then again, if thinking is unnecessary for action, why bother with the fact that "we cannot adequately report what we have done or why we have done it" (p. 546). James himself anticipated modern work on cognitively unmediated ideomotor action. If social reasoning has little influence on behavior, false ideas or misconstruals can be safely ignored. This, at least, is a coherent behaviorist approach that Allport (1924) might have appreciated.

What has been lost from social cognition is the thinking process. Moskowitz uses a wealth of research to show the mechanistic contingencies among ever more subtle environmental stimulations, intervening mental constructs, and overt behavior. But what does the mind actually do? Moskowitz cites Hume as stating that "all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience" (p. 10). Even if the mind does not add new content, are not the combinatorial activities noted by Hume of the reasoning kind?

The most complex and mysterious type of reasoning is strategic. Its proper domain is interpersonal. Moskowitz raises the problem of strategic thought in his closing section when discussing the prisoner's dilemma game. Unfortunately, he misrepresents the dilemma both graphically and verbally. The payoff matrix (p. 526) shows a game with two equilibriums (cooperation/defection and defection/cooperation), whereas the prisoner's dilemma has only one equilibrium (mutual defection). The verbal description does not recognize the key feature of the game, which is that defection is always rational on the assumption of individual self-interest. Instead, Moskowitz claims that if "the prisoner believes that the partner will not talk [that is, will cooperate], then it is in his or her best interest not to talk also" (p. 526). Quibbles aside, social dilemmas offer opportunities for research to explore how strategic social cognition operates. That people become more or less cooperative after being primed with notions of cooperation or competition, respectively, is interesting, but it cannot be a full account of how a strategic player's mind is made up. Social cognition is—or, rather, should be—more than a mechanistic account of impression formation. When people think about others whom they know to be thinkers

too, they enter into a dynamic world; we need more dynamic theories to reflect this reality.

References

Allport, F. (1924). *Social psychology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). *Social cognition*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

James, W. (1907). *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking*. New York: Longman Green.

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American Psychologist, 39*, 341-350. PsycINFO   Article

Kunda, Z. (1999). *Social cognition: Making sense of people*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Libet, B. (1985). Unconscious cerebral initiative and the role of conscious will in voluntary action. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 8*, 529-566. PsycINFO

Peirce, C. S. (1905). What pragmatism is. *Monist, 15*, 161-181.

Russell, B. (1972). *A history of Western philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.