PSYC 325 Fundamentals of Social Psychology

Chapter 3: Social Cognition
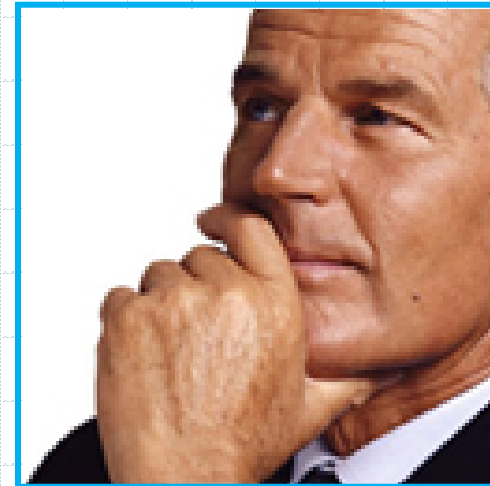How We Think About the Social World

Outline

- On Automatic Pilot: Low-Effort Thinking

- Controlled Social Cognition: High-Effort Thinking

- A Portrayal of Social Thinking

- Cultural Differences in Thinking

Social Cognition

- How we select, interpret, remember, and use social information

- Two ways information is processed:

Automatic

Controlled

On Automatic Pilot: Low-Effort Thinking

- Automatic Thinking:
  - Thinking that is unconscious, unintentional, involuntary, and effortless
    - e.g., recognizing a common object (sunglasses) or situation (birthday party)
  - We rely on *schemas* for this information

Schemas

- Mental structures people use to organize their knowledge about the social world

- Influence the information we notice, think about, and remember
  - The way in which we process information

- Information that is relevant is processed quicker than information that is not relevant

Schemas

- Advantages:
    1. Efficient information processing
    2. Reduced ambiguity
    3. Preparedness
        - What will happen and what to do
- Disadvantages:
    1. Only notice information that fits
    2. Dismiss information that does not fit
        - Exception = sub-category

Schemas

- Kelley's (1950) study describing a guest lecturer:
  - *"People who know him consider him to be a rather cold person...."*

    Or

  - *"People who know him consider him to be a very warm person...."*
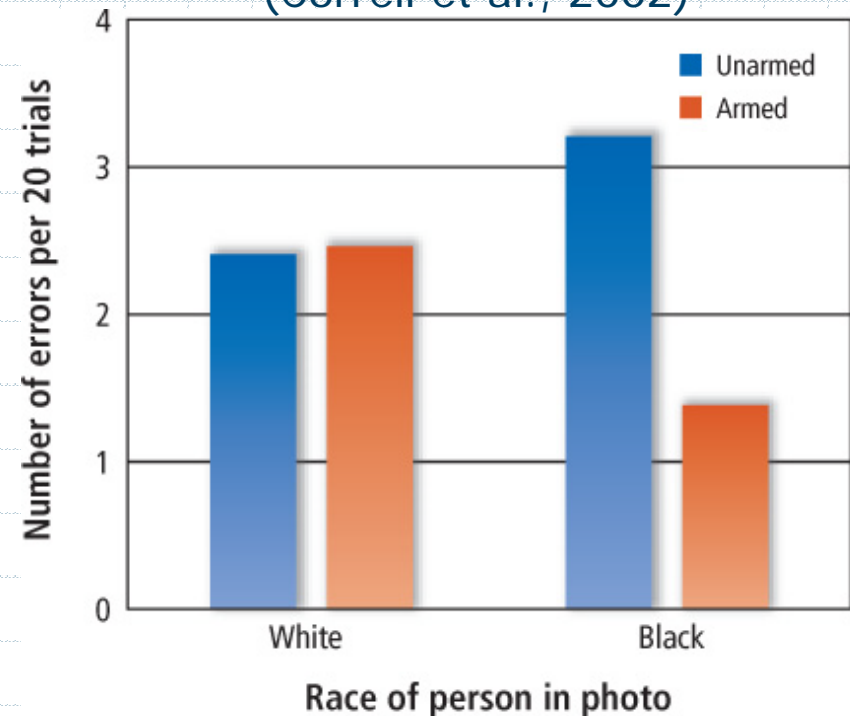
Automatic Thinking with Schemas

- Look for schema-consistent information

- Gardner, MacIntyre & Lalonde (1995)
  - Participants rated *stereotypical* characteristics of various ethnic and gender groups *quicker* than non-stereotypical characteristics

- Stereotypes: Schemas about members of a social group
  - They are applied rapidly and automatically when we encounter others

Automatic Thinking with Schemas

- Various studies have shown effects of people's racial stereotypes
  - Ex: Stereotypes about race and crime

(Correll et al., 2002)

Automatic Thinking with Schemas

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  - Ex: Stereotypes about race and crime

The Police Officer's Dilemma:
Using Ethnicity to Disambiguate Potentially Threatening Individuals

Joshua Correll, Bernadette Park,
and Charles M. Judd
University of Colorado at Boulder

Bernd Wittenbrink
University of Chicago

http://psych.colorado.edu/~jclab/FPST/demo/canvas/testPrograms/st_v.1.html

Cultural Determinants of Schemas

- The content of our schemas is influenced by our culture

- We pay most attention to and best remember information that is important in our culture
  - e.g., Bantu herdsmen have well-developed schemas about cattle

The Functions of Schemas

- Help us organize, and make sense of our world, and to fill in the gaps of our knowledge

- Helps us to have continuity and to relate new experiences to our past

Which Schemas are Applied?

- Accessibility: the extent to which schemas and concepts are at the forefront of people's minds
  - Therefore likely to be used when making judgments about the social world
    - Chronically accessible - Past experiences
    - Temporally accessible - Recent experiences or related to a current goal
- Priming: the process by which *recent experiences* increase a schema or trait's accessibility

Examples

"People generally see what they look for, and hear what they listen for."
-Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

Making our Schemas Come True

- **Self-fulfilling Prophecy**:
  - When peoples' expectations about what another person is like influences how they behave towards that person, which in turn causes the person's behaviour to become consistent with their original expectation
  - Recall Rosenthal & Jacobson's (1968) "boomer" study

Expectations

Other's behaviour *Our behaviour*

Making our Schemas Come True
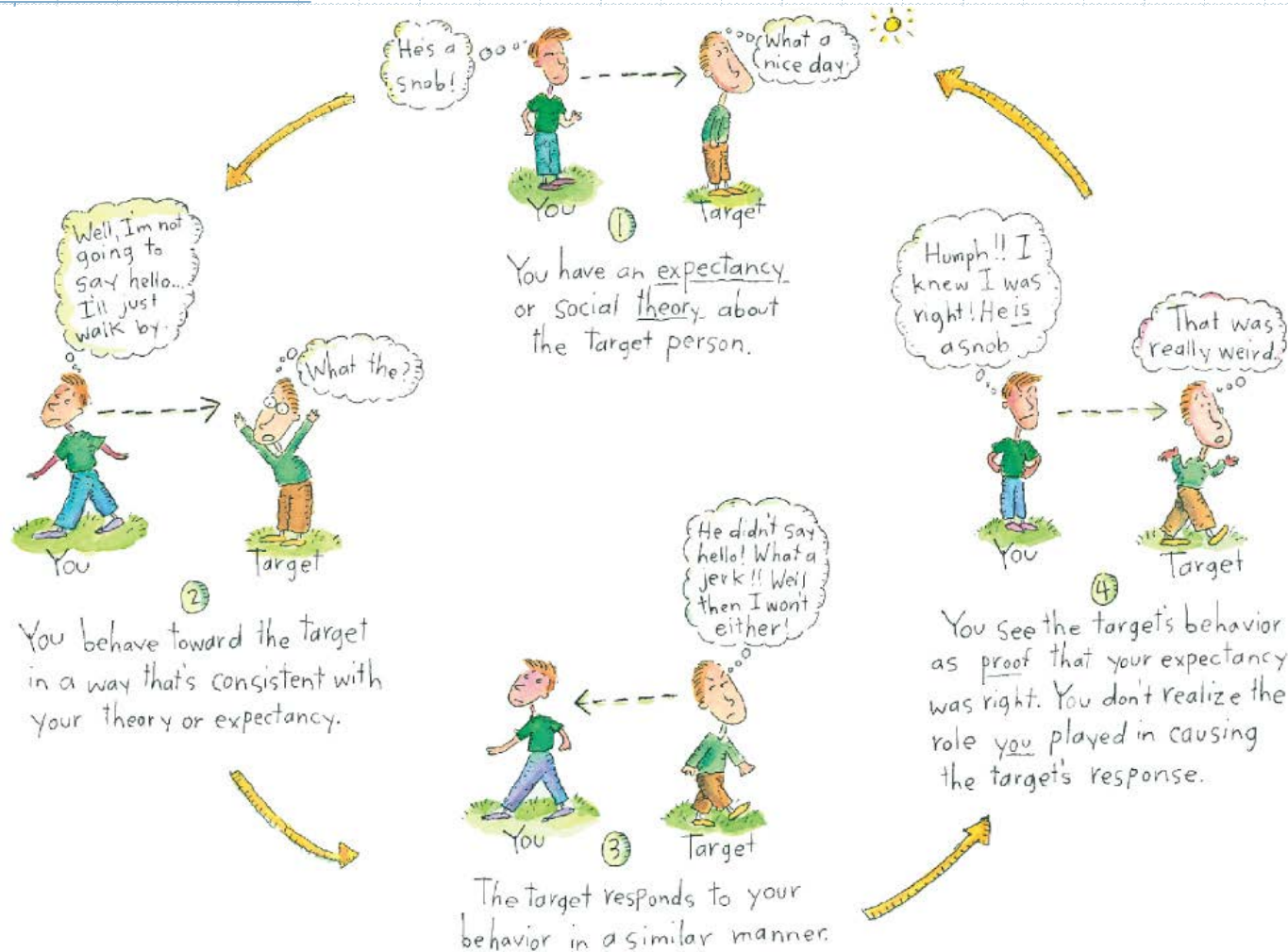
Self-fulfilling Prophecy Example

Mental Strategies & Shortcuts

Factors to consider: Price, reliability, safety, & horsepower
Ratings: Best, Very good, Good, & Poor

	Car A	Car B	Car C	Car D
Price	Good	Very good	Best	Poor
Reliability	Very good	Best	Good	Very good
Safety	Very good	Good	Poor	Best
Horsepower	Best	Very good	Poor	Good

Most important factor to you: Price
Least important factor to you: Horsepower

Mental Strategies & Shortcuts

	Car A	**Car B**	**Car C**	**Car D**
Price	Good	Very good	Best	Poor
Reliability	Very good	Best	Good	Very good
Safety	Very good	Good	Poor	Best
Horsepower	Best	Very good	Poor	Good

Two most important factors to you: Price & reliability
Least important factor to you: Horsepower

Mental Strategies & Shortcuts

	Car A	Car B	Car C	Car D
Price	Good	Very good	Best	Poor
Reliability	Very good	Best	Good	Very good
Safety	Good	Good	Poor	Best
Horsepower	Best	Very good	Poor	Good

Three most important factors to you: Price, reliability, & safety
Least important factor to you: Horsepower

Mental Strategies & Shortcuts

- People use mental shortcuts (judgmental heuristics) in order to make judgments and decisions quickly and efficiently
  - When there is no schema, or there are too many to choose from
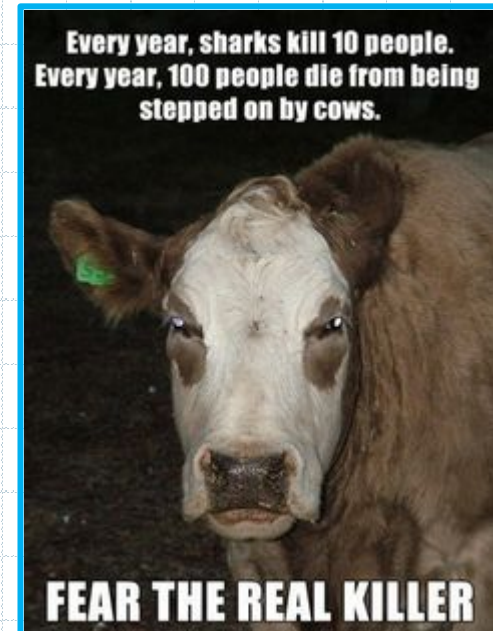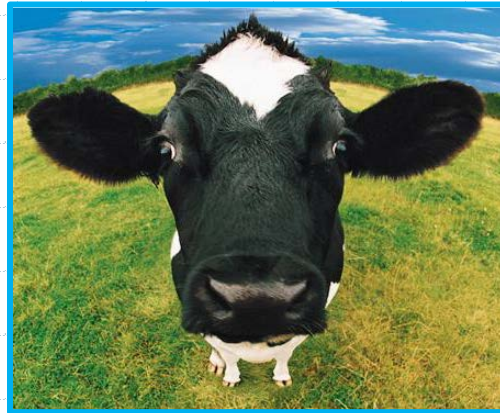 - Rule of thumb

Mental Strategies & Shortcuts

- **Availability heuristic**: a mental rule of thumb whereby people base a judgment on the ease with which they can bring something to mind

- **Representativeness heuristic**: a mental shortcut whereby people classify something according to how similar it is to a typical case

Availability Heuristic

- Based on availability of relevant information
- How easily do examples come to mind?
  - e.g., is John a generous person?
  - e.g., am I assertive?

Every year, sharks kill 10 people. Every year, 100 people die from being stepped on by cows.

FEAR THE REAL KILLER

Which is more of a danger to humans?

The patient was here last week exhibiting flu-like symptoms (fatigue, fever, headache, & weakness). The doctor on-call simply told her to rest & drink a lot of liquids.... however, she still hasn't recovered.

Dr. House notices she has dog fur on her clothes and mud on her boots...
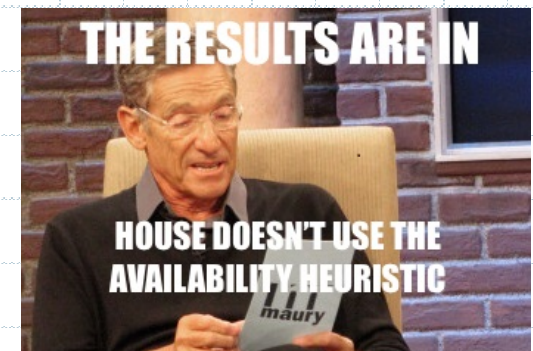
Dr. House: "Do you have a dog?"
Patient: "Yes."
Dr. House: "Do you walk your dog in a field?"
Patient: "Yes"
(Dr. House quickly checks her body for a rash and finds one)
Dr. House: "She has a red mark, which is likely the spot where a tick entered her skin. She has Lyme Disease, not the flu.

THE RESULTS ARE IN

HOUSE DOESN'T USE THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC

maury

Representativeness Heuristic

- Example: Tom is a 42-year-old who reads nonfiction books, listens to National Public Radio, and plays tennis in his spare time. Which is more likely?

  a. Tom is an Ivy League professor
  b. Tom is a truck driver

Representativeness Heuristic

- Classify someone/something according to how similar it is to a typical case

- Research shows that people do not sufficiently use *base rate information*, relying more on the representativeness heuristic

Librarian or Beautician?

The Pervasiveness of Automatic Thinking

- Automatic (unconscious) thinking is often used for making judgments and decisions
- There is evidence that our *unconscious minds* may make *better* decisions on some tasks than our conscious minds
  - e.g., Dijksterhuis (2004)

Controlled Social Cognition: High-Effort Thinking

- Not all thinking is automatic

  - Sometimes we pause and think deeply about ourselves and the social world

- Controlled thinking:

  - Thinking that is conscious, intentional, voluntary and effortful

  - Kicks in when the "huh?" factor occurs

Controlled Social Cognition: High-Effort Thinking

- Unlike automatic thinking, controlled thinking is effortful
  – Requires mental energy and motivation

- People can only think in a controlled conscious way about one thing at a time

- One purpose of controlled thinking is to provide checks and balances for automatic processing
  – Used when accuracy is important

Thinking about What Might have Been

- Counterfactual thinking:
  - Mentally changing some aspect of the past as a way of imagining what might have been
  - Usually conscious and effortful, but not always voluntary and intentional
  - People are more likely to engage in this when they can easily imagine having avoided a negative event
  - The easier to imagine a tragedy having been avoided, the more distressed people feel

Counterfactual Thinking

- Attempt to rewrite the past
- Two types:
  1. Upward counterfactual reasoning
  2. Downward counterfactual reasoning

Counterfactual Thinking

- Upward counterfactual reasoning
  - Imagine outcomes that are better than reality
  - e.g., negative events, near misses (silver vs. bronze)
  - Utility: lessons for the future, motivational

Social Cognition

Counterfactual Thinking

- Downward counterfactual reasoning
  - Imagining outcomes that are worse than reality
  - e.g., "I'm in a wheelchair but I could have been killed in the car accident"
  - Utility: sense of relief

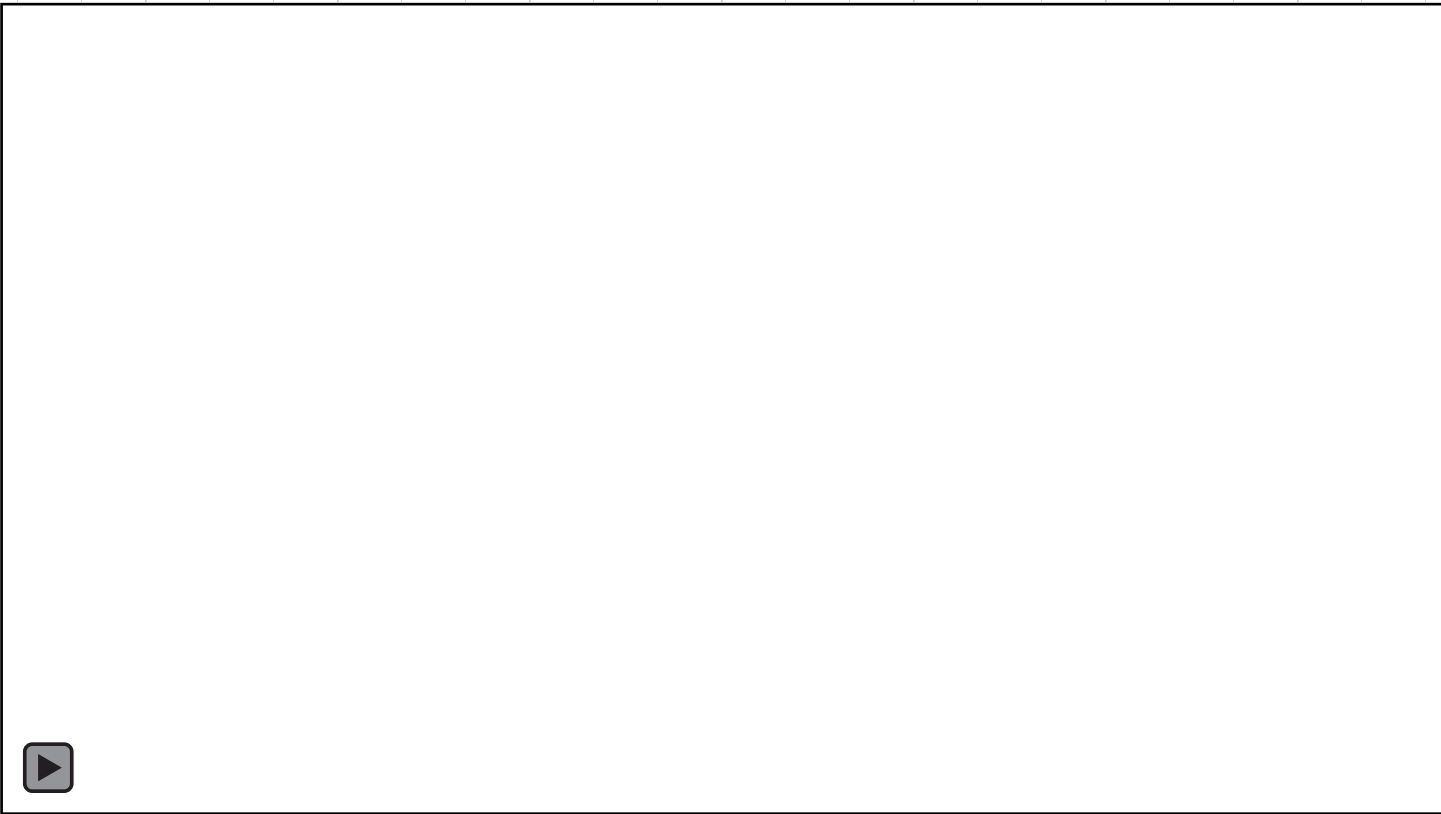# Counterfactual Thinking

- People feel more sympathy when negative outcomes follow an unusual rather than usual event
  - e.g., accident on alternate route home
- The same holds true for near misses
  - e.g., runner missing gold by 1/1000th vs. 1/100th of a second

Counterfactual Thinking

- Which type is this?

Thinking about What Might have Been

- Counterfactual thinking can be useful, however, if it:

  – Focuses people's attention on ways that they can cope better in the future, by

  – Motivating them to take steps to prevent similar outcomes from occurring in the future

Thought Suppression & Ironic Processing

- Thought suppression:
  - The attempt to avoid thinking about something a person would prefer to forget

- Successful thought suppression depends on the interaction of two processes:
  1. The monitoring process
  2. The operating process

Thought Suppression & Ironic Processing

- Monitoring process
  - The automatic process of searching for evidence that the unwanted thought is about to intrude on consciousness

- Operating process
  - The controlled, effortful, and conscious attempt to distract oneself by finding something else to think about
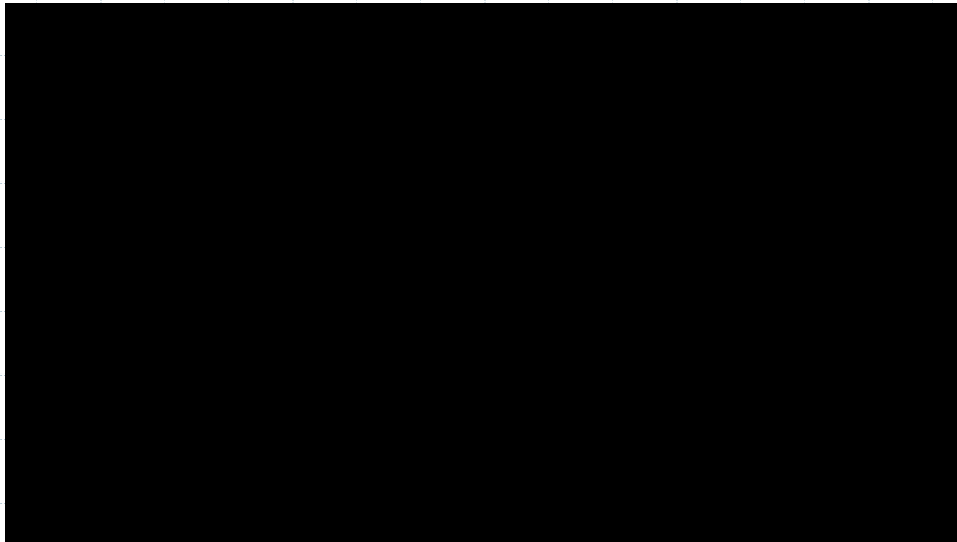
Thought Suppression & Ironic Processing

So what's the irony?

Thought Suppression & Ironic Processing

- When we try the hardest to suppress thoughts, those thoughts are most likely to enter our minds

- Thought suppression can have negative effects on our mental and physical health

A Portrayal of Social Thinking

- The issue of whether people are good social thinkers has been the subject of considerable debate

- Perhaps the best metaphor of the social thinker is that people are like "flawed scientists"
  - Thinkers who are attempting to discover the nature of the social world in a logical but imperfect manner

A Portrayal of Social Thinking

- People use a number of mental strategies when reasoning about themselves and others

- We tend to use these strategies effectively, but our judgements are sometimes not as correct as we think they are

  – e.g., hair pieces and lying

Social Cognition
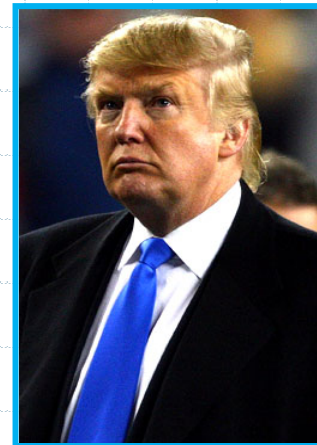
Improving Human Thinking

- If people's social thinking is sometimes flawed, how can their mistakes be corrected?

- One answer is to make people avoid an overconfidence barrier
  - The barrier that results when people have too much confidence in the accuracy of their judgments

Improving Human Thinking

- Possible strategies:
  - Ask people to consider other points of view than their own
  - Teach people some basic statistical and methodological principles about how to reason correctly
    - For best results, this should be accompanied by instruction on how to apply these principles to everyday contexts

Cultural Differences in Thinking

- People from Western cultures tend to have an analytic thinking style:
  - Focusing on the properties of objects/people without considering the surrounding context
- People from East Asian cultures tend to have a holistic thinking style:
  - Focusing on the whole picture
  - i.e., the person/object and the surrounding context

Social Cognition

What is the Source of these Differences?

What is the Source of these Differences?

- ## Study by Miyamoto et al., (2006)
  - Japanese and American university students were primed with either Japanese or American city scenes
  - Those primed with Japanese city scenes (which were busier) were more likely to notice changes to the background between two images
  - These results showed that people in all cultures are capable of thinking holistically or analytically
    - The environment we are in influences our thinking style

on the next...

social PSYCHOLOGY

Chapter 4:

SOCIAL PERCEPTION