

Try It Yourself (page 14)

Schemata influence how we perceive more complex social situations. To understand the variability we show in our schemata and how our own perceptions of the world may be influenced by our previous experiences, indicate how you would interpret the following situations. Then ask one or two friends how they would interpret the same situations. Are there differences?

1. Someone you barely know suddenly becomes very friendly and helpful, even offering to run errands for you and lend you money.

A common interpretation of this is "He/she wants something" and we may become wary of accepting their help. Sometimes this is a justified response, but sometimes all the person wants is to become a friend because he/she likes you. A person's past experience with others is often a determining factor in how they interpret a situation like this. The person who has been subjected to exploitation by others may be less likely to see the overtures of a potential new friend as being altruistically motivated. Then again, the person who has never experienced exploitation may be too trusting! Finding a balance between caution and trust is usually the best course.

2. Your closest friend is uncharacteristically withdrawn and quiet.

This may be interpreted in many ways: your friend is depressed after experiencing a negative event, your friend is not feeling well, your friend is anticipating something negative in the future, your friend is annoyed with you, your friend has discovered deeper feelings for you than just friendship, and so on. It may even be that your friend is simply contemplating a philosophical question! We tend to interpret the behaviour of others in terms of how they have behaved in the past, but if this gives us little information (in this

example, your friend is "uncharacteristically withdrawn and quiet"), we use information from our knowledge of how other people or even ourselves behave. So we may think "I get withdrawn and quiet when I'm angry", so we suspect our friend is angry too. Or we may think "Most people that I know get withdrawn and quiet when they have a fight with their parents, so my friend must have had a fight with parents too." These sorts of interpretations are often incorrect, of course, so gently asking "Is something on your mind?" is a better idea than jumping to conclusions.

3. You have a choice as to which of the following people you will have dinner with: an artist, an accountant, a car mechanic, a nuclear physicist. What would you expect the dinner conversation to be like with each? Which would you choose? Is your choice based on a stereotype, or some personal schema?

Most professions have stereotypes associated with them. Hence, an artist may be expected to talk about creative subjects and have different and sometimes strange ideas and conversation topics. Accountant are often perceived to be dull and interested only in money and numbers, while a car mechanic may not be expected to discuss the ballet and a nuclear physicist may not be expected to have much to say about gardening. In all these cases, a great error is being committed: not only is it incorrect to assume that a stereotype is accurate, but it is also incorrect to assume that all people in a group share similar characteristics. When we have more experience with people in different groups, our expectations become more accurate because we come to understand people's diversity and we regard them as individuals rather than as representatives of a group.

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William James emphasised asking good questions over gathering data; Wilhelm Wundt was concerned with gathering data. Which aspect appeals to you? Examine your own behaviour: do you prefer thinking about why a situation is occurring or why people are behaving in certain ways, or do you prefer to bide your time while closely observing people and situations to gather information? Are these two orientations necessarily antagonistic? Could you find a way to reconcile the orientations of Wundt and James? How could you convince each man that the orientation of the other was necessary?

While we all have individual preferences in our orientations to examining the world, a good case can be made that both James's and Wundt's orientations work together to give the most complete picture. Without asking good questions, we may not observe meaningful and important behaviours and situations. When we ask good questions, we can direct our observations so that we are not distracted by irrelevancies or differing issues. But without observing behaviour and situations, we may not find answers to our good questions, or even be able to determine what a 'good' question is. Psychological science proceeds best when both orientations are used, usually by making some preliminary observations, forming questions based on these observations, observing again to find the answers to the questions, modifying the questions and forming new ones based on these observations, and so on.

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Basing a definition on something observable is not itself enough to make a definition operational, because different observers may still define what is to be observed differently. Try this simple example: Light a candle and sit quietly around it with two or

three other people. For five minutes, let each person silently count the number of times the candle flame flickers. After five minutes, compare your counts. Do not be surprised to see numbers varying from two to two thousand. Yet each of you was watching the same candle flame! The problem was that each of you was defining 'flicker' in a different way. Now, work as a group to develop a common definition of 'flicker', and then watch the flame again for five minutes. Using this agreed-upon definition of 'flicker', do the individual number counts of the group come closer to agreement?

How could you measure the following so that the observations would meet the requirements of an operational definition?

hunger

(e.g., 6 hours without food)

joy

(e.g., increased presence of laughter and smiling)

fatigue

(e.g., increased presences of slow movements, sleeping)

grief

(e.g., increased presence of crying, moaning)

aggression

(e.g., increased presence of hitting, shouting)

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To understand how self-reports and direct observations can yield different results, consider the example of eating. How much do you eat during a typical day? How many calories do you consume? Give a rough estimate. Now spend a day actually recording what you eat and calculate the number of calories you consumed. Do the results match your estimate? Did measuring your consumption make you feel self-conscious about your eating behaviour? Is it possible your food choices changed because of this? When people are asked how much they normally eat, they are usually quite inaccurate. This is why a standard technique used to help people diet is to ask them to keep a record of their food consumption: many people are appalled at how many calories they ingested without being aware of it! Not surprisingly, being aware can itself cause changes in (eating) behaviour (*reactivity*). As a result, the choice between self-report and direct observation can be a complicated decision for a researcher.

Another test you can perform on yourself is to keep track of the number of hours you study. Most students overestimate the amount of time they study, and so are righteously indignant when an instructor suggests that they study more! This is one reason why studying in a library is often a good idea: the atmosphere is quiet and conducive to concentration, and the presence of other people (with whom you are not interacting!) produces reactivity to make you study more diligently.

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Imagine you want to measure soft drink preferences unobtrusively. How would you do this? Think about this before you go on reading.

You probably thought about sitting in a restaurant or school cafeteria and counting the number of people who bought certain soft drinks. But did you consider that not all soft drinks may be available in this particular location? Did you consider the time of day (since some people may prefer caffeinated soft drinks but will avoid them in the evening, or some people who don't normally choose caffeinated drinks might choose them in the late afternoon when their energy level is low)? What about other factors that could affect your measurements? Thinking about this now, do you trust your original method to give accurate results?

Simply observing people to find information about people in general is not by and large the most effective way of obtaining accurate results. In the above example, an anecdote may help demonstrate this: A colleague set her first year psychology class this assignment, to determine the most favoured soft drink at a park where young children played. The students found that one soft drink was bought by children between the ages of about 8 and 12 years many, many more times than other drinks. As the students were about to conclude that this drink was the one that children liked best, they discovered that the manufacturers of this drink were running a contest, and the more drinks the children bought, the higher their likelihood of winning. In fact, with more observation, the students found that some children were purchasing the drink, only to throw out the container's contents, but to save the portion of the container required for the contest! One student finally asked a child how he liked the drink, and the child responded, "It's awful, but I really want to win the bike!" So the students could conclude that at this particular time, in this particular situation, these particular children favoured one drink

above others, but they could not conclude that this was a favourite drink in terms of taste, nor could they conclude that this drink would be purchased more often by anyone who was not interested in the contest (adults, for example) or that the drink would be purchased after the contest ended.

The problems with observational studies have implications for our day-to-day lives as well. We often conclude that people have the same attitudes towards many issues that we do because all our friends seem to agree. But consider, part of the reason these people are our friends is because they hold similar attitudes to us. We are less likely to be friends with people whose attitudes are very different from our own (e.g., how likely is it that a person who strongly believes in the value of education would be friends with someone who believes education to be a meaningless waste of time?). Of course, we do have friends who don't agree with all our views, but for the most part, we can't make conclusions about the general population from only observing a select group of people such as our friends. Observational studies are meaningful and useful in psychological research when we bear in mind their limitations and don't try to make too many general conclusions from them. As in the case of the anecdote, they may also be useful in terms of guiding us to ask questions that are very revealing.

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Case studies can be fascinating reading and are often very compelling. The presentation of a real person instead of vague numbers (e.g., "Sam" instead of "200 people") induces us to relate more to the person in the study, and we often put more faith in the case study because of this. (This is the reason why advertisers rely more on testimonials from

satisfied customers than on statistics.) Unfortunately, the vividness of a case study does not demonstrate that it is representative. For example, an advertisement may relate the story of "Joan's" success with an exercise program, even though "Joan" may be the only person to have been satisfied!

Think of an example of a testimonial ad you've seen: on what basis did you decide the case is representative or not? What else might you want to know in making your assessment?

We are more likely to believe the testimonial from a friend than we are from a stranger, and more likely to believe someone who seems similar to us than someone who seems dissimilar. So the degree to which we can relate to the person who gives the testimonial is a strong factor in its believability. An example of this can be seen in weight loss advertisements. These advertisements tend to be more believable when the testimonial is given by an "ordinary" person who shows before and after photographs (indicating that this person really did once have a weight problem that has now been resolved) than by a super model whose body type may always have tended to extreme thinness. The claims made by the testimonial are also evaluated. In this example, a testimonial given by an "ordinary" person claiming that he/she lost 20 pounds in 2 months is more believable than a testimonial given by a supermodel who says he/she lost 20 pounds in one week. Another factor that may play a part is how much we want to believe the testimonial. As another example, one of the authors of 'Approaches to Psychology' (MH) was cursed (or blessed, depending on your perspective) with extremely straight hair with little body. As a teenager and young woman, she spent a large amount of money on hair products that

were advertised by testimonials of young women who claimed that the product made their hair wavy and bouncy. (MH still has straight hair with little body, but now she saves her money!)

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Have you ever thought about someone when suddenly they telephoned you or appeared?

This is the "speak of the devil" effect. Given the three possible explanations of correlations, how would you interpret this phenomenon? Test the correlation yourself: concentrate on a friend you haven't seen for quite a while, and wait five minutes. Did he or she call or appear? Try concentrating on a few more friends in this way. How often do they call or appear as you concentrate? Does your testing affect your view of the "speak of the devil" effect?

This often-cited example is a case of a coincidence or an illusory correlation. No real correlation exists, but we do tend to be impressed when that one coincidence occurs. This sticks in our minds and we remember this more vividly than the many occasions when we think of a friend and the friend doesn't call (more about this in Chapter 4). Likewise, we remember the time we walked under a ladder and then tripped on the sidewalk much more than we remember all the times we walked under a ladder with no ensuing problems. And we remember the success we had on a test when we wore a certain shirt, but we forget all the times we wore the shirt and nothing good or bad in particular happened.

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Have you ever heard the expression "There's safety in numbers."? This saying reflects the belief that people are safer when with a number of people than when alone. Given the research on bystander apathy, what do you conclude about this saying now? Which study had the greatest influence on your outlook? Did you find the laboratory experiment, the field experiment, or the case study of Kitty Genovese the most compelling? Why? Do you think that bystander apathy can be plausibly studied by doing experiments which simulate emergencies? Or should it be studied using naturalistic observation in real emergencies?

It may happen that sometime in the future you will be with other people when you see someone have a minor accident (tripping, a sports injury, etc.). Knowing what you know now, what will you do?

There may be more safety in numbers when a group of people who know each other are confronted with a situation in which help is required because they may feel that they share a group responsibility, they can confer with each other about what to do, and individuals may not wish to appear apathetic in front of their friends or colleagues (i.e., social influence may be stronger). A group of strangers, however, may not have these advantages. Many people find the field study most compelling in demonstrating bystander apathy because it escapes the problems of artificiality and reactivity that are present in a laboratory experiment. But the drama of the laboratory experiment and the horror of the Kitty Genovese case study are highly compelling as well. In psychological research, the

most compelling case is made when the same type of results are derived from all three kinds situations.

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It's often assumed that older people like different music than younger people. Try to design a quasi-experiment to test this. Try this before you read on.

Presumably you decided to ask older and younger people their music preferences. Did you specify what constitutes "older" and "younger" people? That is, did you consider that 20 year olds and 15 years olds (all of whom might be considered "younger") may have different tastes? Similarly, what age groups did you designate as "older people"? It is likely that your parents and your grandparents might differ from each other in their tastes in music as well. Clearly, the terms "younger" and "older" need to be specified. But there's more: Are there other factors that may play a part? For example, older people raised in different countries may well have different preferences in music. Or younger people raised in a rural area as opposed to a city may differ. What other factors do you think might contribute to any differences observed?

Another factor might be to what extent the people you ask have had access to music today and in their youth. While many of us take the ready accessibility of music for granted, this accessibility may not have been present for other people in their earlier days, or may not be present today. Also, hearing acuity may be a factor in people's music preferences (if your "older" group is indeed elderly, it is likely that their hearing is not as acute as it was in their youth, so they may prefer the music of their youth simply because they can't hear

contemporary music as well). As an example of another factor, MH's grandmother contended that she didn't like contemporary music, especially not rap music, until MH played the music of one well known rapper for her. Grandma said in amazement "But he's good!" This illustrates that sometimes there are differences in music preference because people haven't listened to music apart from one particular type: they may be convinced they don't like rap music (or classical, or country, etc.) simply because they haven't listened to it.

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Imagine that you are a researcher asking an ethical review board to approve an experiment similar to Milgram's obedience study. What arguments would you make to the board? Now imagine that you are a member of the board. Are you convinced by the arguments? What alternatives might you suggest to address the underlying research goals? *This is a hard question with no set answers. Undeniably, Milgrim's study taught us much, and in many ways it is difficult to conceive of how we might have learned the lessons without the drama of this study. But is it worth it? That's a value judgement that individuals must decide for themselves. Most ethic boards would not sanction such a study today, but are they right? Are we remaining unaware of important psychological information by having such stringent ethical requirements? Does the possible distress of a few people outweigh the need of the rest of the world to know the results of such a study? For many people, much of the answer to this question depends on the potential importance of the information that may be gained from such a study. But since meaningful results cannot be guaranteed in any psychological research, other people,*

and generally members of ethics boards, usually uphold the rights of the few to be protected from distress.