

Cognitive Distortion in Interpersonal Relations: Clinical Implications of Social Cognitive Research on Person Perception

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Everyday interactions with new people are often influenced by an individual's interpersonal history, which affects perceptions of and behavior toward new people, and one's own sense of self in the moment. Biases in interpersonal perception arise from the activation and use of relational knowledge, including mental representations of specific significant others from the individual's life, enabling past relationships to pervade new ones. Research on this social-cognitive process, and the relational self that is activated in such contexts, suggests that it occurs as a "normal" nonclinical process outside of the therapy setting. Here, we review the theoretical framework and evidence of this social-cognitive process, including how it is triggered (and why) and with what consequences, for better or for worse, in the context of daily living and in treatment. We also address clinical implications, with a focus on how problematic relationship patterns arising in this way can be changed if they lead to personal suffering for the individual.

Keywords: social cognition, person perception, cognitive distortion, bias, relationships

Past personal relationships are known to be relevant to how people see themselves and behave, a notion with a long history in psychology (James, 1890; Mead, 1934). Over two decades of research on social-cognitive processes in interpersonal perception among ordinary people have provided evidence that significant others, in particular, influence an individual's responses to new people (e.g., Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Chen & Andersen, 1999). Knowledge stored in memory about close others is often evoked during interpersonal interactions and influences how new persons are perceived. On the heels of this, fundamental shifts occur in how individuals construe themselves in the moment, leading to a variety of relevant emotional and motivational effects (Andersen & Chen, 2002).

In our basic research in psychological science, we focus on how these processes emerge in everyday life in "normal" individuals; how-

ever, we also believe that the phenomena have clear clinical implications. The evidence may warrant clinicians' attention, as it shows that these processes lead to cognitive biases, that is, interpretive and memory biases in the individual. If these processes have painful or problematic consequences for the person, provoking conflict, suffering, or maladaptive behavior, they may be troublesome and the person may wish to change them. Although evoking a positive prior relationship can at times have a salutary effect on new relations, when the prior relationship was troubled, that is less likely.

In this review, we begin by defining these social-cognitive processes that evoke past relationships and related biases in interpersonal encounters, and then outline the relevant empirical findings and phenomena. We conclude by addressing the implications this evidence has for the individual's interpersonal functioning in the therapeutic relationship and treatment.

We define a significant other as any person who is (or once was) deeply influential and in whom one is (or once was) greatly emotionally invested. This includes family members, past or current romantic partners/spouses, best friends, close coworkers, and the like. In our model (Andersen & Chen, 2002), peoples' sense of themselves (and indeed their personality) is em-

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