

ON ILLUSIONS 2

How Our Mind Makes us Perceive Others: Three Examples of Illusions in Interactions

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Illusions and stereotypes are important in everyday interactions; they make the world more understandable to us. Illusions and stereotypes can also be quite misleading however. In this article three anecdotes accompanied by a theoretical background illustrate how we can be biased (or not) before we interact, when we start to interact, or when we have been interacting for a while. Following these articles, in-group and out-group stereotyping, media influenced stereotyping and the impostor syndrome are discussed.

Before starting my first year in psychology I believed that all people who choose a certain topic to study are very much alike. I believed that all computer scientists spent their entire day behind the screen, that all archeology students were searching for dinosaurs (this turned out to be a complete illusion because only paleontologists study dinosaurs, archeologists never do so), and that all medical students would get excited at the thought of wounds and needles. When entering the enormous room packed with psychology freshmen, I expected to find 300 versions of myself.

Of course it did not take me too long to discover that this was not true and that there were more differences between me and my fellow freshmen than

there were similarities. This illusion turned out to be quite normal; most people have illusions when they encounter a new situation. New situations provide people with enormous amounts of information. To make sense of the new information quickly, people rely on stereotypes. Stereotypes are defined by Lipmann (1922) as pictures in the head, simplified mental images of what others, individuals or groups, look like, and what they do. If we enter a new group and interact with one person, we form a stereotype of the entire group that is based on the person we interact with. When stereotyping a person we attribute certain characteristics to that person and also assume that these characteristics are shared by all of his fellow group members (Brown, 2000).

Illusions before we meet: Ingroup vs. Outgroup

When we belong to a group, we often identify with the other group members. All members who do not belong to our group, the out-group members, are seen as “them” compared to “us”, the in-group members. Research shows that we like the in-group members better than the out-group members (e.g. Clement & Krueger, 1998). When in a position to distribute benefits, we treat in-group members more fairly and altruistically than the out-group members. We perceive the others as more similar to

each other, compared to a more diverse in-group. This is called the out-group homogeneity effect. This effect may be due to the fact that we know more about in-group members, interact more superficially with out-group members and are more motivated to remember specific details about in-group members (Smith & Mackie, 2000)¹.

As an example of this out-group homogeneity effect, we think that all archeology students are the same, but notice big differences among our fellow psychology students. The out-group homogeneity effect thus makes that if we know something about one member of the out-group, we think that all other members of the out-group also possess that trait. The following story illustrates how we can mistakenly believe that all members of an out-group are similar, or dress similarly at least.

Last February, I went to Cardiff to do research at Cardiff University for five months. Cardiff is the capital city of Wales, and therefore part of the United Kingdom. I had only two expectations about the U.K. First, it always rains over there and is pretty cold. And second, the people are very neat and properly dressed. These expectations turned out to be complete illusions. My illusion closest to the truth was the one about the rain. It does rain in Cardiff, although not more than in the Netherlands, so certainly not always.

Regarding the second illusion, most people in Cardiff appeared to be the complete opposite of neat and properly dressed. When they go out at

night, they wear as few clothes as possible. They seem to want the shortest skirt and most indecent look. I was very surprised about this ‘prostitute-fashion’, first because I expected British people to be neat, and second because I expected people to wear warm clothes in winter. Even though Cardiff appeared to have slightly warmer winters than the Netherlands, it still freezes at night in winter. Despite the cold, all girls walk outside with skirts and tops shorter than you can imagine. The only place I have seen people dressed like that before was at Aruba, which has a tropical climate. The British girls seem unable to feel the cold. Even during the day, when there is no need to dress up, they often don’t wear coats. I am still wondering if they genetically don’t feel cold, or if they got used to the cold, or if they just pretend to feel comfortable.

- Victoria Visser -

Illusions in interaction: Perceptual confirmation of media-based stereotypes

Stereotypes are formed through personal experience, but also through social learning. We learn about group differences from the behaviour of our parents, teachers and peers, or from their explicitly formulated social norms. As the story above illustrates, the media can have a large influence on the forming of stereotypes. The social norms of a culture are often communicated in art, literature and movies (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Today’s soaps and TV series give us the illusion that we know all about places on the other side of the world. Although these series are based on real life, they often show a stereotypical version of the truth. Even television shows that appear to give us an objective view on another culture or country can bias our view. The story above illustrates what kind of illusions can arise after watching programs about the

¹ This out-group homogeneity effect has its limitations, for example, when the in-group is a minority it is perceived as more homogenous by both in-group and out-group members. For more information on this topic see for example Simon, Aufderheide, & Kampmeier (2001). *Minority-Majority Relations*. In: R. Brown & S. Gaertner (Eds.) *Intergroup processes* (pp.303-323). Basil Blackwell, Inc, Cambridge, MA, US.

U.K. on Dutch television. The next story describes how TV series can actually create a lens through which we perceive a city, its people, norms and values, even though we might want to approach it in an open, unbiased way, with the eye of a stranger so to speak.

I must admit that I felt truly illiterate and part of an unknowledgeable out-group whenever I found myself in the midst of people chitchatting about Sex and the City or other TV series that take place in one of the most glamorous, flamboyant, and exciting cities of the world. Eventually, as I found out that even some of my male friends knew more about these shows than I did, I knew I had to watch at least a few episodes. Notwithstanding the fact that the shows could be quite amusing sometimes, I was convinced that the image they conveyed of New York was rather unrealistic, or at least highly exaggerated. Was there really so much to talk about for a columnist of a local paper to entertain her readers issue by issue? And even more so, could relationships ever be such a big issue as they appear to be on the show?

Having forgotten about all this when I arrived in New York at the beginning of this year, I soon got struck by what were among the first things brought up in conversations with people I met outside school to hang out with. “Do you want to know what a conversation with a typical New York woman is like? Within the first five minutes, she asks ‘Where do you live?’, ‘Do you have a car?’, or ‘What’s your income?’ It’s terrible! No, there’s no chance for a man to find the love of his life here.” Another male friend who has been here for a while seemed quite happy to have a normal conversation with me, because, as he told me, whenever he talked to a man in this city, he would be asked “Are

you gay?” and a woman would immediately think he was aiming at a one-night stand. I am still not sure whether I want to believe cheap TV stories or not, but just a few days ago, when I told my flat mate, a former fashion photographer, that my friends (all girls from Amsterdam) were coming to town, he asked me whether I also had any friends in New York. “If they are hot, bring them along!” Good old Sex and the City... Does it tell the truth or create lively illusions that seamlessly confirm themselves like self-fulfilling prophecies? To all those who are eager to hear a rational answer, yes, one can counteract self-confirming processes (see Slusher & Andersen, 1987; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997) and find disconfirming exemplars of men and women who are married or engaged. And for those who like gossipy entertainment, go and see for yourself! But remember: Your own eyes might trick you...! ;-)

- Janina Marguc -

Some of our stereotypes will disappear after a while. Interacting with our new group for a while makes us realize that some of our primary expectations were illusions, based on our stereotypical view of the group. When we have more interactions with members of the group, information that is inconsistent with our stereotype comes from too many individuals to be explained as atypical, and because of the more frequent interactions we have more time to process information, so we do not want to rely on stereotypes anymore. Therefore our stereotype is replaced by a more accurate view of the group (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Second, after entering the new group we become a part of it and start viewing the group members as in-group members rather than members of an out-group. As explained above, we see our in-group members as more heterogeneous. The stereotype is there-

fore replaced by a view of the group members as separate individuals.

Illusions after a series of interactions: The impostor syndrome

Once included in our new group, we start to worry about our self-presentation. Most people feel that it is important to convey a positive impression of themselves to others. However, we do not want to present ourselves too positively because we do not want others' expectations of us to be too high. This is especially true when we think that others perceive us more favourably than we perceive ourselves. The belief that one is not as competent as one appears to others leads successful individuals to feel like impostors or frauds, and to fear being unmasked (Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Wagoner Funk, 2000). In psychology, these kinds of feelings are referred to as the 'impostor syndrome', in which success is attributed to contacts, luck, timing, perseverance, personality or otherwise having 'fooled' others into thinking you are smarter and more capable than you 'know' yourself to be (Kets de Vries, 1990). The next story illustrates the impostor syndrome that occurred when entering American academia.

Even though I had already been in the field of psychology for several years and should have been prepared to start a doctoral program, my first few months at New York University were accompanied by anxiety and stress. I felt like entering academia might have been aiming too high as I couldn't quite keep up with lectures and often had difficulty understanding what people were talking about. These feelings were exacerbated by my view of America as a land of opportunities; of people with achievement-oriented mind-sets looking out only for themselves. I envisioned extremely hard-working

graduate students, utterly productive and efficient, focused solely on competing with each other, camping out in their offices, and intent on winning the next Nobel Prize. I felt nowhere near capable of developing a similar attitude and was expecting to be 'unmasked' at all times. When handing in an assignment or when publicly presenting my work, I thought, "See, now they will find out I do not belong here and that they have made a mistake in accepting me into the program". That I did end up at New York University must have been the luck of the draw or simply due to the fact that I had previously collaborated and become friends with my current advisor.

It took me a few months to recognize my illusion and now I am in the process of 'recovery'. My language skills have improved, which makes a tremendous difference, and I am starting to learn how the game is played. I now realize that people do not expect me to come up with the next big theory right away. The curriculum is set up such that students can spend their first two years developing their interests, absorbing information, and becoming familiar with the lifestyle of an academic. American students certainly work hard, but due to the heavy course work, and the abundance of lectures, talks, and receptions to attend, nowhere near as time-efficiently as I had expected. I now also work nights and weekends and have in that sense become quite successfully assimilated, but I should point out that academic productivity is not reflected in the number of hours one 'camps out' in the lab. My envisioned rivalry between students also turned out to be a misconception. New York University has in fact proven a wonderful environment for me, not least because of its tight-knit student body (one positive consequence of 'living' at work and spending large parts of the day socia-

lizing). My fellow students are not as competitive as I imagined, but are truly passionate about their work and very willing to share their experiences. If I am ‘unmasked’ after all, it will be by friends, which would never be as bad.

- Jojanneke van der Toorn -

What can we do about it?

At this point, we know that when we enter a new group, we can be influenced by stereotypes toward the other group that might be built by an interaction with a member of the group, acquired through social learning, or induced by the media. After discovering that we are influenced by our illusions, we continue having preferences for our in-group and start worrying about our self-presentation, which may lead us as young students into the impostor syndrome. What can we do to avoid this?

When motivated enough, stereotypes can be suppressed or corrected. This requires people to make conscious efforts to avoid, revise or correct the judgments that may be influenced by stereotypes. Contact with out-group members may also help, as long as we do not think that the out-group member is not typical for his or her group or that the person is doing quite well for an out-group member. When afraid to be unmasked as a fraud, try to boost your self-esteem and to attribute your successes to your own competence instead of luck. After all, you are the person that will serve as an example to derive the new stereotypes from!

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