

Social Cognition: Thinking about the Social World

- Schemas
- Heuristics and Automatic Processing
- Potential Sources of Error in Social Cognition
- Affect and Cognition

Social Cognition—how people interpret, analyze, remember, and use information about the social world

- Schemas—mental frameworks centering around a specific theme that help organize social information
 - Schemas influence three basic processes:
 - Attention (They affect what is noticed.)
 - Encoding (They affect what is stored in memory.)
 - Retrieval (They affect what is recovered from memory.)
 - Schemas have stronger effects on social cognition when they are strong and cognitive load is high.
 - Schemas can result in distortions in how the social world is understood.
 - Schemas are resistant to change.
 - Perseverance Effect—the tendency for beliefs and schemas to remain unchanged even in the face of contradictory information
 - Schemas can be self-fulfilling.

- Self-fulfilling Prophecy—predictions that, in a sense, make themselves come true.
- Therefore, schemas help make sense of the social world, but they can result in inaccurate processing of information.

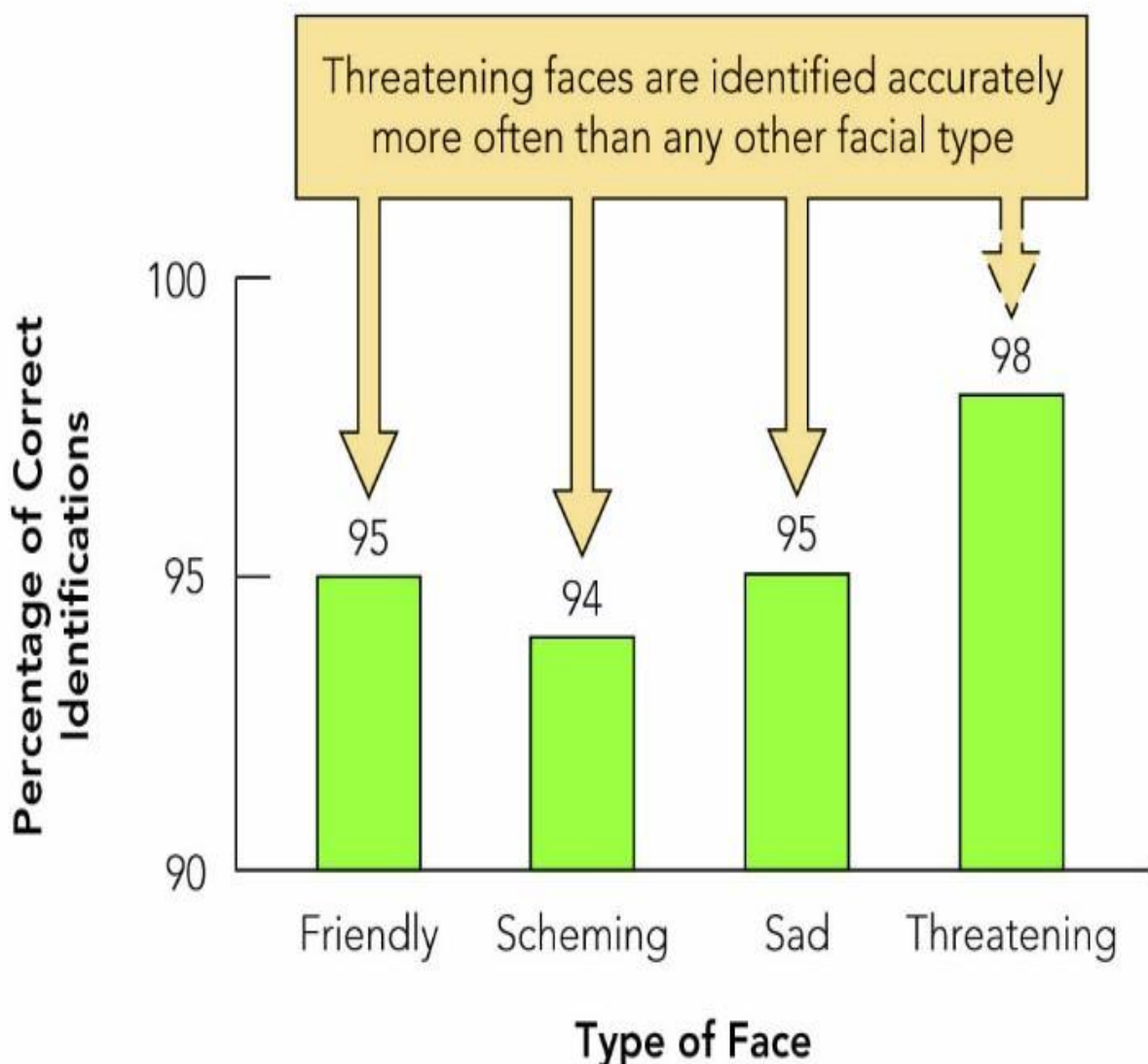
Heuristics and Automatic Processing

- The complexity of the social world and the limited nature of cognitive processing can result in **information overload**.
 - A strategy to reduce mental effort is the use of heuristics—simple rules for making complex decisions or drawing inferences in a rapid, seemingly effortless manner.
 - **Types of Heuristics**
 - Representativeness—making judgments based on the extent to which current stimuli or events resemble other stimuli or categories
 - The similarity of an individual to typical members of a given group results in the judgment that the individual belongs to that group.
 - Judgments based on this rule can be wrong because base rates are often ignored.
 - Availability—making judgments on the basis of how easily specific kinds of information can be brought to mind
 - Judgments based on this rule can be wrong because the likelihood of events that are dramatic, but rare, can be overestimated.
 - This heuristic is related to **Priming**—which occurs when stimuli or events increase the availability in memory or consciousness of specific types of information held in memory.
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- Anchoring and Adjustment—the tendency to make judgments using a number or value as a starting point to which adjustments then are made
 - Judgments based on this rule can be wrong.
 - Anchors often are arbitrary.
 - Personal experiences do not serve as good anchors since they are unique and unusual and therefore inapplicable.
 - Automatic Processing—after extensive experience information processing becomes effortless, involuntary, unintentional, and nonconscious
 - Automatic processing versus controlled processing (which is effortful and conscious) offers gains in efficiency that can be offset by inaccurate processing of social information.
 - An example is the automatic activation of stereotypes.
 - Automatic activation of schemas can lead to automatic effects on social behavior.
 - Controlled versus Automatic Processing: Two systems for evaluating social stimuli
 - Evidence from social neuroscience
 - Different parts of the brain are activated depending on which type of social evaluation people make.
 - The amygdala may be involved in automatic (simple good versus bad) judgments.
 - Portions of the prefrontal cortex appear to be implicated in controlled evaluative reactions.
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Potential Sources of Error

- Negativity Bias—people show greater sensitivity to negative information than to positive information
 - People are faster and more accurate at identifying threatening facial expressions than positive facial expressions.
 - Bias may be explained by evolutionary factors.
 - Negative information reflects features of the external world that may threaten safety and well-being.



- Optimistic Bias—predisposition to expect things to turn out well, overall
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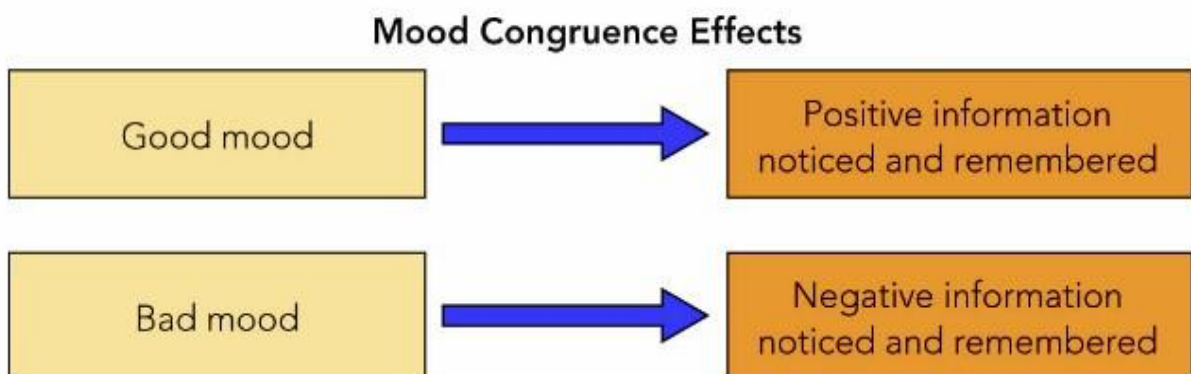
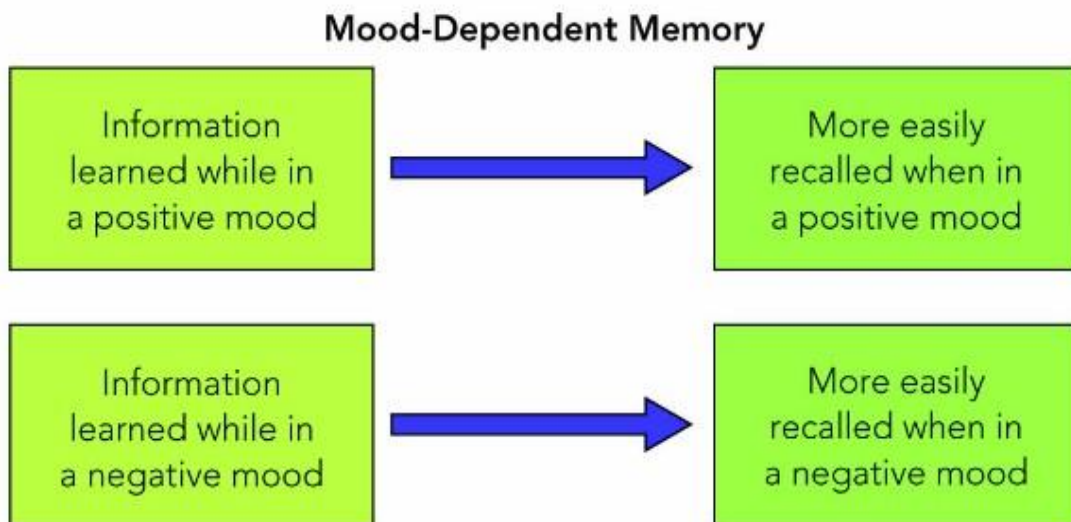
- People believe that they are more likely than others to experience good outcomes, and less likely to experience bad outcomes.
 - **Overconfidence Barrier**—tendency to have more confidence in the accuracy of judgments than is reasonable
 - **Planning Fallacy**—tendency to make optimistic predictions about how long it will take to complete a task
 - It occurs because people tend to focus on the future while ignoring related past events and they overlook important potential obstacles.
 - **Bracing for loss**—an exception to the optimistic bias
 - When people expect to experience something negative that has important consequences for them, they tend to become pessimistic, anticipating a negative outcome.
 - The desire to brace for a loss, may be an adaptive tendency that helps people protect themselves from bad news.
 - **Counterfactual Thinking**—tendency to imagine other outcomes in a situation than the ones that actually occurred
 - Thoughts may occur automatically and require cognitive effort to dismiss.
 - People who have these thoughts can experience both benefits (hopefulness) and costs (regret).
 - Can either boost or depress current moods
 - Can mitigate the bitterness of disappointments
 - **Thought Suppression**—efforts to prevent certain thoughts from entering consciousness
 - Involves two processes:
 - **Monitoring**—automatic search for unwanted thoughts.
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- Operating-controlled, conscious attempt to distract oneself by thinking about something else.
- Rebound effect—occurs when someone is fatigued or experiencing information overload; result is only monitoring process is working.
 - Suppressing unwanted thoughts may actually increase them.
 - People high in reactance—react very negatively to perceived threats to freedom—show stronger rebound effect.
- Magical Thinking—thinking based on irrational assumptions
 - Examples are thinking that one's thoughts can influence the physical world and thinking that things that resemble each other share basic properties.
- Failure to take account of moderating variables
 - People are not good at acknowledging the roles that moderating variables (factors that may be influencing an outcome) play.

Affect and Cognition

- The Influence of Affect on Cognition
 - Moods affect how new stimuli are perceived.
 - Happy moods can increase creativity.
 - Happy moods can make people more susceptible to social influence.
 - Information that evokes emotional reactions may be processed differently than other kinds of information.
 - Bad moods lead to more systematic thinking, while good moods lead to more heuristic thinking.
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- Mood-dependent memory—information remembered while in a given mood may be determined, in part, by what was learned when previously in that mood
- Mood congruence effects—people are more likely to store or remember positive information when in a positive mood and negative information when in a negative mood



- **The Influence of Cognition on Affect**

- Two-factor theory of emotion: the perception of situations can determine emotional reactions
- Activation of schemas containing a strong affective component can exert powerful effects on current feelings and moods.

- Thoughts can regulate emotions.
 - The “I never had a chance” effect
 - Convincing oneself that “I never had a chance” helps regulate mood by reducing disappointment.
 - Yielding to temptations can reduce negative affect.