SAGE reference

Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking describes a person's attempt to understand a stimulus from a different point of view. In relationships, perspective taking typically describes one person's attempt to understand a relationship partner's mental representations—his or her thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, or evaluations. *Perspective taking* is a broad term that is generally used to describe conscious and deliberate attempts to infer other people's mental states. Perspective taking can lead to empathy, whereby a person directly experiences another's emotional state or can induce people to experience emotions about another person's experience, such as pride or sympathy.

Although some evidence exists of perspective taking in higher order primates, there appears to be a dramatic and qualitative difference in both the frequency and elaborate content of perspective taking in humans, making it one mental process that appears to truly distinguish humans from other animals. Accurate perspective taking is a critical feature of successful social interaction, but it is far from invariant. Some situations, some people, and some cultures are more naturally inclined to activate perspective taking than are others. Sometimes the process that enables perspective taking leads to accurate inferences about others' mental representations, but sometimes it leads to predictable biases in judgment, such as the tendency to overestimate the degree of agreement with another person. Sometimes the attempt to understand another's perspective has desirable effects on social interactions, such as when it leads to accurate insight about others' preferences, but it can have negative consequences when biased judgments lead to mistaken inferences about others' preferences. Understanding the process that enables perspective taking is crucial for understanding the variability in its consequences.

Developing Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is not a skill with which humans are born, but instead must develop over time. Young children, for instance, tend to be profoundly egocentric and do not distinguish between what they know and what others know, do not recognize the difference between the way an object may appear to them and the way it really is, and do not provide enough contextual information in conversation to identify ambiguous referents. By roughly the age of 5, most children have developed the ability to distinguish between themselves and others, and they have developed the ability to reason about another person's thoughts, feelings, and other mental states as being distinct from their own. Perspective taking develops out of these two abilities. The psychological disorder of autism (and its less severe version, Asberger's Syndrome; proper spelling is Asperger, not Asperger's) represents a breakdown in the development of perspective taking.

Variability in Process and Content

The process by which people adopt another's perspective can include both reflexive (or automatic) and deliberate (or controlled) components. Because people perceive the world through their own senses and interpret it through their own brains, people tend to use their own perspective as a guide for understanding others' beliefs. Although adults have developed the ability to overcome egocen-trism when reasoning about others' thoughts to accommodate differences between themselves and others, it does not appear that they entirely outgrow their tendency to begin with an egocentric default. The most common bias observed when people reason about others' thoughts is therefore egocentric bias, whereby people overestimate the extent to which others' perceptions are similar to their own. In communication, for instance, people tend to overestimate the extent to which their intentions are clear to their conversation partner. Because a speaker's intentions are so clear to him or her, it may be difficult to recognize that a listener may easily misinterpret a playful tease, a subtle joke, or a constructive criticism. Such egocentric biases are a frequent cause of discord and conflict in relationships. For instance, those who are personally unsatisfied in a relationship tend to see more hostile intent in a partner's behavior than the partner actually intends. Overcoming one's own egocentric perspective and intuiting another's differing perspective therefore tends to require deliberate effort and attention, and any-

thing that diminishes a person's ability or motivation to expend effortful thought should generally increase the magnitude of egocentric biases in judgment. Over time, effective perspective takers learn to overcome their own egocentric perspective more readily and consider another's perspective more naturally, but this process does not appear to ever become completely automated.

Not only can perspective taking vary in the extent to which it is activated automatically versus more effortfully, it can also vary in the process by which people try to adopt another's perspective when they are induced or motivated to do so. In particular, individuals can try to adopt another's perspective either by imagining what that other person thinks or feels or by imagining what they would think or feel if they actually were the other person. These two methods of perspective taking produce different physiological and neural responses, and they also differ in their implications for empathic versus self-centered responses to another person. The former is associated with increased empathy, whereas the latter may increase both empathy and personal distress in response to a person in need.

Determinants, Moderators, and Correlates

As with any other skill or ability, possessing a skill and utilizing it appropriately when necessary are two different things. The most important situational, dispositional, and cultural determinants of perspective taking are those that predict when people are likely to try to adopt another's perspective and when they are not.

Because perspective taking is generally an effortful process, the major situational determinants of perspective taking are those that make it easier to imagine oneself in another's position or increase the incentives and motivation for doing so. It is easier to imagine oneself in the position of a person who is similar to the self or who is well liked rather than despised. Both perceived similarity to a target and liking for a target increase the likelihood of adopting that target's perspective. Similarly, prior experience with a situation faced by a target also tends to increase perspective taking. Adopting another's perspective is more difficult when cognitive capacity is limited, such as when one is distracted by some other task that requires attention.

A person has more incentive to adopt the perspective of a person with whom one expects future interaction, and anticipated future interaction therefore increases the likelihood of perspective taking. Individuals who occupy a position of low status or low power within a social organization also have more incentives for adopting the perspective of others and tend to do so more than high-status or high-power individuals. In everyday life, this effect of power and status on perspective taking may also stem partly from the demands and responsibilities that accompany being in a position of power and the diminished cognitive capacity that results from such demands.

Because perspective taking is a mental ability that develops over time through repeated practice, individual differences that index the likelihood of acquiring such practice should predict perspective taking. Chief among these is age: As children get older, they acquire the ability to overcome their own egocentric perspective and reason about others' differing mental states. There is little evidence, however, that such development continues throughout life, and little if any research suggests that older adults are more likely to engage in perspective taking than younger adults. Culture also predicts perspective taking as a function of the frequency and importance of orienting oneself toward another's perspective within that culture. Collectivist cultures (e.g., the majority of Asian and Latin American cultures) place great value on interdependence and define the self in terms of relationships with others, whereas individualistic cultures (e.g., the majority of North American and Western European cultures) tend to value independence and define the self in terms of one's personal accomplishments and status. Members of collectivist cultures, as a result, are more likely to engage in perspective taking than members of individualistic cultures. Finally, self-reported perspective taking is correlated with better social functioning and higher self-esteem, suggesting either that well-adjusted individuals have an enhanced capacity for adopting others' viewpoints or that perspective taking leads to better social function and

increased personal well-being.

Relatively less evidence exists for gender differences in perspective taking. Although recent theories suggest the advantage of women versus men in perspective taking is biologically based and that the brain of people with autism—a condition characterized by deficits in perspective taking—is the extreme form of the masculinized brain, surprisingly few studies support this female advantage. Some research demonstrates that females are more accurate in perspective taking, but only in situations that evoke the expectation that women *should* be better in this capacity. Awareness of the stereotyped concept of "women's intuition" may cause women to work harder at tasks assessing empathic accuracy. These findings suggest that the female advantage in perspective taking may result from differing culturally conscribed expectations for the two genders, rather than from an innate biological sex difference per se.

Consequences

Perspective taking produces both obvious as well as nonobvious consequences for social interaction. Because perspective taking involves putting oneself in another's position, adopting another's perspective tends to increase the perceived similarity between oneself and others. This has several interesting consequences. First, perspective taking tends to increase the extent to which people behave charitably toward others. It increases the degree to which people feel empathy for others in positions of need, increases the likelihood of their behaving altruistically, and generally induces more positive evaluations of others. Naturally occurring or experimentally manipulated perspective taking increases the likelihood that people will respond to a request for assistance, donate time and resources to another person, and attempt to provide relief to an individual experiencing pain or suffering. Studies have similarly demonstrated that perspective taking can reduce the likelihood of aggression against another person. Second, perspective taking tends to increase the extent to which people mimic the basic mannerisms of their interaction partner, such as adopting the other person's body posture. Such mimicry tends to increase feelings of social rapport with another person and increases liking for the other person. Third, perspective taking tends to decrease the tendency to stereotype others. Putting oneself in the position of a stereotyped group member means that less attention is paid to the stereotypic features of the group member, which therefore reduces the likelihood that those features are used when making judgments about these group members. Finally, perspective taking, by its nature, tends to reduce a host of egocentric biases in judgment. People, for instance, tend to overestimate the extent to which others notice and pay attention to them, the amount that they, compared with others, have contributed personally to a group endeavor, and the extent to which a self-serving conflict resolution will be perceived by others as fair. Perspective taking in these interpersonal contexts tends to reduce such egocentric biases and the associated problems that follow. In negotiations between groups, perspective taking tends to increase understanding of an opposing side's preferences and increases attention paid to the opposing side's preferences.

All of these consequences suggest that perspective taking is generally beneficial for social interaction, but there are some negative consequences as well. In particular, adopting another's perspective tends to reduce people's focus on themselves, but people who look into the minds of others do not always do so accurately. Men in abusive relationships who look into the minds of their spouses, for instance, tend to overestimate their wives' hostile intentions. In competitive contexts, people tend to overestimate the extent to which others intend to behave self-interestedly, a tendency that may enhance the consequences of these mistakes. As a result, those who adopt the other side's perspective in a competitive negotiation may overestimate the extent to which others will behave selfishly and therefore behave more selfishly themselves than do people who do not think about the other side's perspective. Whether perspective taking produces desirable consequences for social interaction and relationships depends on what people see when they put themselves in the shoes of another person.

- perspective taking
- egocentrism
- egocentric bias
- bias
- empathy
- social interaction
- collectivism

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See also

- Attribution Processes in Relationships
- Cognitive Processes in Relationships
- Conflict Resolution
- Empathic Accuracy and Inaccuracy
- Empathy
- Understanding

Further Readings

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