SELF-ESTEEM AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

4. HUMAN RELATIONS

4.1. Harry Stack Sullivan

Harry Stack Sullivan was trained in psychoanalysis in the United States, but soon drifted from the specific psychoanalytic beliefs while retaining much of the core concepts of Freud. Interestingly, Sullivan placed a lot of focus on both the social aspects of personality and cognitive representations. This moved him away from Freud's psychosexual development and toward a more eclectic approach. Freud believed that anxiety was an important aspect in his theory because it represented internal conflict between the id and the superego. Sullivan, however, saw anxiety as existing only as a result of social interactions. He described techniques, much like defense mechanisms, that provide tools for people to use in order to reduce social anxiety. Selective Inattention is one such mechanism. According to Sullivan, mothers show their anxiety about child rearing to their children through various means. The child, having no way to deal with this, feels the anxiety himself. Selective inattention is soon learned, and the child begins to ignore or reject the anxiety or any interaction that could produce these uncomfortable feelings. As adults, we use this technique to focus our minds away from stressful situations.

Through social interactions and our selective attention or inattention, we develop what Sullivan called Personifications of ourselves and others. While defenses can often help reduce anxiety, they can also lead to a misperception of reality. Again, he shifts his focus away from Freud and more toward a cognitive approach to understanding personality. These personifications are mental images that allow us to better understand ourselves and the world. There are three basic ways we see ourselves that Sullivan called the bad-me, the good-me and the not-me. The bad me represents those aspects of the self that are considered negative and are therefore hidden from others and possibly even the self. The anxiety that we feel is often a result of recognition of the bad part of ourselves, such as when we recall an embarrassing moment or experience guilt from a past action.

The good me is everything we like about ourselves. It represents the part of us we share with others and that we often choose to focus on because it produces no anxiety. The final part of us, called the not-me, represents all those things that are

so anxiety provoking that we cannot even consider them a part of us. Doing so would definitely create anxiety which we spend our lives trying to avoid. The not-me is kept out of awareness by pushing it deep into the unconscious.

Another similarity between Sullivan's theory and that of Freud's is the belief that childhood experiences determine, to a large degree, the adult personality. And, throughout our childhood, the mother plays the most significant role. Unlike Freud, however, he also believed that personality can develop past adolescence and even well into adulthood. He called the stages in his developmental theory Epochs. He believed that we pass through these stages in a particular order but the timing of such is dictated by our social environment. Much of the focus in Sullivan's theory revolved around the conflicts of adolescence. As you can see from the chart below, three stages were devoted to this period of development and much of the problems of adulthood, according to Sullivan, arise from the turmoil of our adolescence.

Sullivan's Developmental Stages

Infancy Age birth to 1 year	From birth to about age one, the child begins the process of developing, but Sullivan did not emphasize the younger years to near the importance as Freud.
Childhood Ages 1 to 5	The development of speech and improved communication is key in this stage of development.
Juvenile Ages 6 to 8	The main focus as a juvenile is the need for playmates and the beginning of healthy socialization
Preadolescence Ages 9 to 12	During this stage, the child's ability to form a close relationship with a peer is the major focus. This relationship will later assist the child in feeling worthy and likable. Without this ability, forming the intimate relationships in late adolescence and adulthood will be difficult.
Early Adolescence Ages 13 to 17	The onset of puberty changes this need for friendship to a need for sexual expression. Self-worth will often become synonymous with sexual attractiveness and acceptance by opposite sex peers.
Late Adolescence Ages 18 to 22 or 23	The need for friendship and need for sexual expression get combined during late adolescence. In this stage a long term relationship becomes the primary focus. Conflicts between parental control and self-expression are commonplace and the overuse of selective inattention in previous stages can result in a skewed perception of the self and the world.
Adulthood Ages 23 to death	The struggles of adulthood include financial security, career, and family. With success during previous stages, especially those in the adolescent years, adult relationships and much needed socialization become more easy to attain. Without a solid background, interpersonal conflicts that result in anxiety become more commonplace.

4.2. Perception of Others

A definition of social perception is the part of perception that allows people to understand others in their social world and that allow an individual to make inferences and predictions about others' personalities and behaviors.

- In the field of social psychology, researchers tend to focus on social perception, which is the kind of perception that allows individuals to understand other people, social cues, and non-verbal cues in their environment.
- This type of perception is processed through social cognition, or a thought process used to understand and interpret social interactions.
- Social perception allows individuals to make judgments and impressions about other people.
- It is an essential tool for social perception since it gives an individual the ability to infer what another may be thinking or experiencing.
- Testing Social Perception The Awareness of Social Inference Test is an audiovisual test designed for the clinical assessment of social perception.
- Social perception is a kind of perception that allows one to understand other people, social cues, and non-verbal cues in their environment.

In social psychology, the term person perception refers to the different mental processes that we use to form impressions of other people. This includes not just how we form these impressions, but the different conclusions we make about other people based upon our impressions. Consider how often you make these kind of judgments everyday. When you meet with a new co-worker, you immediately begin to develop an initial impression of this person. When you visit the grocery store after work, you might draw conclusions about the cashier who checks you out, even though you know very little about this person. Obviously, person perception can be a very subjective process that can be impacted by a number of variables. Factors that can influence the impressions you form of other people include the characteristics of the person you are observing, the context of the situation and your own personal characteristics.

People often form impressions of others very quickly with only minimal information. We frequently base our impressions on the roles and social norms we expect from people. For example, you might form an impression of a city bus driver based on how you would anticipate that a person in that role to behave, considering individual personality characteristics only after you have formed this initial impression. Physical cues can also play an important role. If you see a

woman dressed in a professional-looking suit, you might immediately assume that she works in a formal setting, perhaps at a law firm or bank. Salience of the information we perceive is also important. Generally, we tend to focus on the most obvious points rather than noting background information. The more novel or obvious a factor is, the more likely we are to focus on it. One of the mental shortcuts that we use in person perception is known as social categorization. In the social categorization process, we mentally categorize people into different groups based on common characteristics. Sometimes this process occurs consciously, but for the most part social categorization happens automatically and unconsciously. Some of the most common grouping people use include age, gender, occupation and race.

As with many mental shortcuts, social categorization has both positive and negative aspects. One of the strengths of social categorization is that it allows people to make judgments very quickly. Realistically, you simply do not have time to get to know each and every person you come into contact with on an individual, personal basis. Using social categorization allows you to make decisions and establish expectations of how people will behave in certain situations very quickly, which allows you to focus on other things. The problems with this technique include the fact that it can lead to errors and as well as stereotyping. Consider this example: Imagine that you are getting on a bus, but there are only two seats available. One seat is next to a petite, silver-haired, elderly woman, the other seat is next to a burly, grim-faced man. Based on your immediate impression, you sit next to the elderly woman, who unfortunately turns out to be quite skilled at picking pockets. Because of social categorization, you immediately judged the woman as harmless and the man as threatening, leading to the loss of your wallet. While social categorization can be useful at times, it can also lead to these kinds of misjudgments. An implicit personality theory is a collection of beliefs and assumptions that we have about how certain traits are linked to other characteristics and behaviors. Once we know something about a cardinal trait, we assume that the person also exhibits other traits that are commonly linked to that key characteristic. For example, if you learn that a new co-worker is very happy, you might immediately assume that she is also friendly, kind and generous. As with social categorization, implicit personality theories help people make judgments quickly, but they can also contribute to stereotyping and errors.

4.3. Interpretation of Social Behavior

From the moment of birth, humans are social creatures. Indeed, without social interactions (the support of caregivers), no infant would survive. Even when we become capable of living independently, very few people seek to live in isolation. Instead, we generally welcome social interactions, and no study of behavior would be complete without considering these interactions. The study of social behavior is often referred to as "social psychology", but the reality is that studying social interactions is not solely the domain of psychologists--sociologists and anthropologists, among others, also study social interactions in various ways. What distinguishes social psychology from these other disciplines is the emphasis on the individual as the focus of study--that is, social psychologists tend to focus on how individuals act in social situations, and how they are influenced by social processes. Sometimes, the focus is on how the individual is affected by others--what is called social influence. Social influence can include direct influences, like group decision making, as well as indirect influences, like imagining how friends would react to a particular situation. In other cases, social psychologists study the cognitive processes that we use in understanding ourselves and others, called social cognition. Stereotyping and attitude change are examples of social cognitive processes. (Note that while one might imagine that social cognition is simply a sub-area of the Cognitive Approach, in fact, the behaviors related to social cognition can be explained from a variety of approaches--for example, stereotyping can be discussed by the Biological Approach in terms of evolutionary processes.)

Obviously, social behavior is a broad topic, and there is a wealth of material available related to almost any aspect of the subject. Apart from the discussion in the text, you may find the following sources useful for further exploration. You only have to pick up a newspaper or watch the nightly news to realize that aggressive behavior is all too common. Murders and assaults by individuals, riots at political demonstrations or sporting events, and wars are never far from the headlines. Why is aggression so common? And is there anything that society can do about it? For psychologists, trying to understand behavior is always the primary goal, and this is equally true of aggression. Interestingly, psychologists from all five approaches have addressed the issue, and have often come to very different conclusions about the causes of aggressive behavior. To many Psychodynamic and Biological theorists, aggression is an innate drive, which arose as a product of the competition which Darwin called natural selection (sometimes called "survival of the fittest"). To psychologists from the other approaches,

aggressive behavior is learned, like all behavior. Thus, the approaches fundamentally differ in terms of explaining how aggression occurs.

While one might be inclined to regard the dispute as largely theoretical, and therefore irrelevant to everyday life, the implications of the theories are significant in terms of deciding how society should deal with aggression. To those who believe aggression is an innate drive, and therefore unavoidable, the goal is to try to channel aggression into appropriate activities, like sports instead of war. Doing so, they argue, produces a release of drive energy called catharsis. By contrast, those who believe that aggression is learned argue that providing opportunities for "catharsis" really simply teaches people to engage in more aggressive behavior. Nowhere is this disagreement clearer than in discussions about the impact of observing violence. Television, movies, and video/computer games are often full of violence, either simulated (in movies and games) or real (in the case of television news and "docudramas"). What impact, if any, does this frequent exposure to aggressive behavior have on people? According to social learning theory, it will make aggression more likely; the concern is particularly significant when talking about the impact on children, who are presumably more impressionable. As the text discusses, there have been thousands of studies of the issue in the past forty years, and while the majority of the studies clearly favor the social learning interpretation over catharsis, individual studies always have limitations, and the debates about public policy continue. The issue is further muddied, because some would say that, regardless of the theoretical arguments, there is no practical impact of observing violence, because most people are capable of discriminating between fantasy and reality. Let's hope so, because the indications are that entertainment media are more saturated with graphic visual portrayals of violence today than ever.