

# Effect of schemas on our understanding of the social world



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With reference to relevant research studies, evaluate the extent to which our understanding of our social world is constrained by our schemas.

Everyday people use their senses to gain a lot of information about the world they live in. To help filter the important information, ( people ) human beings have developed processes to help make sense of the world around them. One process that people use is schemas; these ( are based on ) can produce stereotypes but provide ( and ) predictability. Schemas relate to particular objects, roles, events or people, they are based on memory and knowledge. However there are times where schemas can be wrong for instance if people jump to conclusions based on a stereotype which turns out to be false. There has been a variety of different research studies into the topic of schemas, how they work, how they change as well as what happens when a stereotype turns out to be wrong. This assignment will examine some of the research studies and their value in evaluating how far schemas constrain how people understand the world.

People gain too much information from the world around them to accurately ( understand ) process it, filtering needs to occur in order for people to clarify what is important. Heider suggested that for people to understand the world they use regularity, predictability and cause and effect (Buchanan, Anand, Joffe and Thomas, 2007). Schemas contain knowledge about particular objects, people and scripts, and the information is organised in memory. It is stored and accessed in a certain way and can be added to changed or used as people learn new or different information that will change the stereotype

they have on a certain object (Buchanan, Anand, Jaffe and Thomas, 2007).

There are many different types of schemas, they can be about people, social roles or events, they are all used as a way of filtering as people do not have the ability to take on all information (Buchanan, Anand, J o ffe and Thomas, 2007). As schemas contain generalised knowledge about objects, they can be wrong and can affect how people see future situations related to the object. This shows that how people see the social world can be constrained by their schemas. Information some see as being unimportant may alter the view of a person that someone else may have a different opinion of.

Schemas can affect how people see the world as what people perceive is shaped by their knowledge, expectations and assumptions about the way the world is (Buchanan, Anand, J o ffe and Thomas, 2007), this means that schemas can often control how people see their social world. The research study which found that schemas exist suggests that peoples social world is controlled by schemas was the research by Bartlett, (1932), who found that when English people were asked to retell a Native American folk tale it became more English over time (Buchanan, Anand, Jaffe and Thomas, 2007). They added more English expectations to it, changing the story to make sense to them, making it easier to remember and retell. This research study could be made more valid if it was done in more cultures, for example if an Indian person was asked to retell an English story, as it would allow for more participants and allow for a more generalised conclusion. The experiment by Bartlett held a lot of value as it started other psychologists looking in to the subject of schemas and their influence on how people understand their world and how much control they have over how people understand their social

world. The method of this experiment is impacted by memory as it is unknown over what length of time the retelling of the folk tale occurs, there could have been a controlled condition where the same people were asked to retell an English folk tale to see how much they change or remember of it. This suggests that the understanding of the social world is controlled by schemas [p2].

A different research study by Darley and Gross (1983), showed that when people were asked to give their view on a girl's academic ability based on whether she came from a high socio-economic status or a low socio-economic one, they suggested she would have an average ability. However after watching a video of her doing an oral exam which showed her having an average academic ability, their view changed. The participants who had watched the introductory video of her from a high socio-economic background suggested she had a high academic ability. However the participants that had watched the low socio-economic background introduction video suggested she had a low academic ability. This shows that the participants' stereotypes which they had after the introductory video seemed to be confirmed after the oral video. This research study suggests that rich children are judged to be more similar to each other than to those from a lower socio-economic background (Buchanan, Anand, Jaffe and Thomas, 2007). This research study showed that while people do not generally want to seem as stereotyping others, ( stereotypical, ) by not jumping to a conclusion after just watching either introductory video, they seemed to have already made up their mind before watching the second video. This shows that schemas are very powerful and can lead people to

conclusions without gathering all the information. The method is ( accurate ) valid as it allows for both the high socio-economic status stereotype and the low socio-economic stereotype. This suggests that how people see and understand the social world is constrained by schemas as the roles people are given determine other generalisations.

The research study that Ruscher et al (2000) did showed that when a person is dependent on another person as well as themselves, the impression of another person is likely to be less based on schemas and involve more information which may contradict the expectations of the person which were first thought of. This suggests that when it matters people can be more open to going beyond their initial expectations (Buchanan, Anand, Jaffe and Thomas, 2007). This experiment also shows that schemas are more efficient as people avoid doing more work unless they have to. The method of the Ruscher et al (2000) experiment was valid as it used four different conditions and the conclusion was drawn up by looking at the average time it took participants to make a comment about the target person. The conclusion drawn from the experiment showed that motivational relevance does effect the importance, people place on schemas and shows that people can form impressions based on characteristics not belonging in the original stereotype of a person, object or event (Buchanan, Anand, Jaffe and Thomas, 2007).

This research study allows for the research into schemas to be extended, it suggests future research into what other reasons people might allow for not simply going with the stereotype, is there other reasons or different motivation apart from monetary gain? It would also be interesting to see if people would do this without any motivation at all. The research shows that

in some cases the social world is not constrained by schemas, that people can look beyond stereotypes; however it also asks more questions in this area [p4].

This [p5] assignment has examined several different research studies that look at schemas and shown that although in some cases schemas do control how people understand the social world, there are experiments that have shown that people can go beyond the stereotype and look at people, objects or events in different ways. The Bartlett study showed that people use schemas to change a folktale to fit in with their culture, what they understand to be right, how people are supposed to behave. The Darley and Gross study showed that people interpret things in a way to support a stereotype which they already believe to be true. However, the Ruscher et al study has shown that people can change what they believe to be true, that they can add or take away characteristics of a person so that they no longer fit with a previous stereotype. These studies together have shown that while most understanding of the social world is controlled by schemas, it is possible for stereotypes to be changed. However the Ruser et al study which showed this, used motivation for people to change their stereotypes and therefore it means that there could be more research done in this area.

Word count: 1357

Bibliography

Buchanan, K., Anand, P., Jaffe, H. and Thomas, K. (2007) Perceiving and understanding the social world in Miell, D. Pheonix, A. & Thomas, K. (Eds.), *Mapping psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Milton Keynes: The Open University.

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[p1]A reasonable introduction which shows understanding of the issue, and tells the reader how you mean to tackle the question.

[p2]Clear account of Bartlett's work with some relevant commentary about the methodology.

[p3]However, it could be said to lack ecological validity since the scenario is presented in a very different way to the real world.

[p4]Clear, accurate and concise account of this study, its methodological benefits and implications in relation to the question.

[p5]A clear and well- focused conclusion, which clearly summarises you points, in relation to the question,