Factors influencing accuracy of interpersonal perception

What factors influence the accuracy of interpersonal perception and the judgments we make about other people?

Within the social environment, interpersonal perception is used frequently to make judgments about other people. The accuracy of these can have considerable bearing in a business context, affecting, for example, whether a colleague is considered trustworthy or an individual motivated enough to warrant managerial training. These are clearly important decisions which could prove detrimental to an organisation if incorrect, yet for a number of reasons, assessments of other people may be quite inaccurate. By recognising such risks, the organisation may be able to develop strategies to help ensure more effective decision-making and operations.

Establishing the accuracy of social judgments is highly complex and perhaps impossible (Pennington 1993: 108). Most such assessments have a culturally situated element: they are made in socio-cultural contexts that influence what might be correct. For example, Saucier and Goldberg (2001), who have carried out research in the applicability of personality testing in different nations, find that terms used to describe personality do not have equivalents in all languages, resulting in a need to recognise different personality frameworks from region to region.

Various cognitive phenomena have been identified that may also compromise accuracy. Stereotyping, for example, is identified by Huczynski and Buchanan (1991: 48) as present in interpersonal perception, and involves attributing particular qualities to an individual on the basis of limited information using prior knowledge and experience. The tendency to

stereotype has been attributed to cognitive economy (Pennington 1993: 115-6). Because the environment is so rich in information, the cognitive processing capabilities of the mind struggle to respond to it all. Stereotyping allows a detailed assessment to be created from limited information processing, making fewer cognitive demands. However, because a large proportion of information is overlooked, stereotyping can lead to significant inaccuracies.

The related concept of prejudice is described by Goleman as " emotional learning that takes place early in life" (1996: 157). Goleman notes that nevertheless, individuals typically deny prejudices and attempt to justify prejudiced decisions by formulating alternative reasons for them (ibid). This perhaps reflects the cognitive dissonance of wishing to appear reasonable within a context where prejudice is unacceptable while nevertheless holding such beliefs. This results in a situation where not only do prejudices lead to inaccurate assessments, but also the reasoning behind the assessments is itself inaccurate.

The fundamental attribution error (FAE), described as " the tendency to attribute another person's behaviour to their dispositional qualities rather than situational factors" (Langdridge and Butt 2004: 359), has been widely researched by psychologists working in the social cognitive tradition. In Western cultures, the FAE is reflected by a scenario where a worker blames having to de-ice their car (a situational factor) before driving to work for their lateness, while their employer may see it as a reflection that the worker is poorly organised (a dispositional factor). Again, cultural factors are influential: it has been found that in the US, dispositional biases are

widespread while in East Asia a more holistic approach is taken (Norenzayan and Nisbett 2000: 132), resulting in the FAE being less commonly seen in eastern cultures (ibid).

Huczynski and Buchanan (1991 48-9) suggest that if interpersonal judgments are to be more accurate, then it is important to be self-aware and recognise one's own biases. However, even this process demands culturally-situated reflexivity and may be subject to similar inaccuracies. For example, Seligman finds that the majority of individuals overestimate their social skills, with the most accurate self-perception being among those with depression (1990: 109-110). This may suggest that a positively distorted view of oneself is advantageous to well-being, and that its abundance leads to poor evaluation of others because of individuals' inability to recognise their own weakness of judgment.

A further factor to consider is whether judgments are made by individuals or socially.

Gleitman identifies the mechanism of social comparison as important in making judgments: this involves establishing what others' views might be in order to help form a judgment (1995: 418). Group dynamics were explored extensively by Tajfel, who notes several characteristics of stereotyping in group situations with, for example, role stereotypes are more often applied by groups to themselves (the in-group) while ethnic stereotypes are more often applied to out-groups, the groups which are not part of the in-group (1982: 5-6). Additionally, if one member of a group stands out from the

others, the tendency of the rest of the members is to stereotype them more actively (ibid: 8).

The mechanisms by which judgments are made may contribute towards inconsistencies between individuals making them. Comparison is fundamental to assessment, according to Mussweiler (2003) who argues that this is done against a standard already established by the judge. Because of individual variations, different judges would be likely to use different standards, leading to different assessments. Comparison against low standards may lead to the ' halo' effect, where an individual is seen more positively than might be warranted (Huczynski and Buchanan 1991: 48).

Another issue is the use of formalised models that may have limited flexibility and overcategorise. This is particularly relevant when applying theoretical constructs in the workplace. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that individuals move up through different levels of need as each lower level is satisfied (Maslow 1943). It has been criticised for its implication that one need will take precedence (Hersey et al 1996: 45), but it is possible that for some individuals, higher needs may be of little interest even when lower needs are satisfied.

The challenge emerging from the above evidence is to establish whether it is possible to minimise risks of poor judgment through conscious effort to overcome the cognitive mechanisms leading to biases. While it is possible that formal controls such as empirically-tested measures could help, there are still issues of the informal judgment of one individual when introduced to another, not to mention the practicalities and ethical issues regarding

testing. Overall, this appears to be an area where inaccuracies and biases may always be influential to some degree, thus awareness may be the best approach to preventing them having a detrimental effect on the organisation.

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