

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVES AND DEFENSIVE PERSON PERCEPTION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT AND A REVISED MODEL

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Three stages in the development of the theoretical framework which has guided research on motives and defensive person perception are described, beginning with a trait approach and ending in a process oriented interactive model. Then, in order to accommodate findings showing that threatening stimuli are often processed in a realistic rather than a defensive way, a revised interactive model is proposed as a 4th stage of conceptualization. According to the revised model, perceiver's motives lead to defensive person perceptions only if (a) the interaction of perceiver's motives with the attributes of the stimulus person and the situation produces emotional arousal in the perceiver; and (b) the perceiver assumes that defensive processing of information related to the stimulus person has higher hedonic value than realistic processing. It was found that defensive effects of motives on person perception are likely to occur primarily outside the laboratory, in the context of lasting and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: psychological motives, defensive person perception, revised model.

The assumption that enduring psychological motives cause people to perceive others and themselves in defensive ways occupies a central role in many theories of personality and psychotherapy (cf. Erdelyi & Goldberg, 1979; Maddi, 1980). From Murray's (1938) research on needs and apperceptive processes through to the New Look period, the empirical investigation of this issue has had a long and often stormy history. The findings are inconclusive and open to different interpretations. See e.g., Tagiury's (1969) and Schneider's (1973) negative conclusions, as opposed to the more positive views of Aronoff and Wilson (1985), Assor, Aronoff, and Messe (1981, 1986), and Battistich, Assor, Messe, and Aronoff (1985). This article contains a brief historical account of three stages in the development of the theoretical framework which has guided research on defensive effects of motives on person perception, and then proposes a revised interactive model as the fourth stage of conceptualization. The revised model is based on suggestions by Shrauger and Altrocchi's (1964) and Tagiury's (1969), and is supported by the results of recent experiments (Assor et al., 1981 1986; Battistich & Aronoff, 1985). It is also consistent with current emphasis on person by situation interaction, and recent developments in stress research (Lazarus, 1983). It is hoped that

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the revised model will provide a useful framework for organizing and clarifying different and sometimes inconsistent findings, and will generate accurate and interesting predictions.

Consistent with many researchers in the area of human motivation (cf. Aronoff & Wilson, 1985; McClelland, 1980; Maddi, 1980; Maslow, 1970; Murray, 1938), I define an enduring psychological motive as a cognitive structure which is linked with strong emotional reactions and which selects, directs, and energizes behavior. Based on S. Freud (1936) and A. Freud (1937) positions and the views of later researchers (cf. Assor et al., 1986; Erdeleyi & Goldberg, 1979; Janis & Mann, 1977; Lazarus, 1983; Luborsky, Blinder, & Schimeck, 1965), we view a cognitive act as defensive if it involves an attempt to reconstruct or change a threatening perception or image into a benign or a less threatening one. Such reconstructions are usually based on the denial or diminution of the threatening aspects of the stimulus. It is important to note that not all the effects of motives on person perception are defensive – e.g., contrary to the opinions of Shrauger and Altrocchi (1964) and Tagiury (1969), there is now considerable evidence showing that motivational dispositions produce increased sensitivity to motive relevant stimuli (cf. Aronoff & Wilson, 1985; Atkinson & Walker, 1956; Battistich, Assor, Messe, & Aronoff, 1985; Cantor, 1976; Carlson, 1961; French & Chadwick, 1956; Hirschberg & Jennings, 1980). However, these influences cannot be viewed as defensive as they do not involve reconstructions of motive threatening information.

I: THE MAIN EFFECT APPROACH

The assumption underlying much of the early theoretical and empirical work on personality and person perception was that motives would have considerable cross situational effects on defensive person perception. This assumption was shared by researchers and authors of different theoretical persuasions. It is implicit in Freud's (1925) description of character types and appears explicitly in Homey's (1945) description of interpersonal orientations. Homey proposed that dependency oriented, moving toward, type of persons manifest a significant positivity bias in their perceptions of others in order to ensure smooth interpersonal relations and obtain other people's liking and support. Superiority oriented, moving against, type of individuals are assumed to manifest a derogatory bias in order to be able to maintain their sense of superiority. Sullivan (1948) assumed that a strong need for social acceptance exerts a defensive impact on perceptual and cognitive processes. From a different perspective, Maslow (1970) proposed that the deficiency needs for belongingness, safety, or esteem are likely to exert a highly defensive bias on individuals' perceptions of self and others. In line with the early findings of the New Look, Bruner and Tagiury (1954) have also postulated the existence of consistent motivational effects on defensive person perception. Naboisek (1953), Leary (1957), and Smelser (1961) have shown that participants' dominance orientation consistently affected their perceptions of others, and thus seemed to support

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the main effect approach. However, as explained by Shrauger and Altrocchi (1964), participants in these experiments interacted with each other before giving their impressions; and therefore the results may reflect the actual influence of the participants on each other rather than reflect an actual defensive bias. Later research in which the problem of differential influence was overcome did not support the main effect approach and showed that perceivers' motives and traits were found to affect their perceptions of others only when the interaction of perceivers' traits with stimulus and situational factors was carefully considered (cf. Assor et al., 1981; Jones & Daugherty, 1959).

II. THE GENERAL INTERACTIVE APPROACH: EMPHASIS ON AFFECT

The findings which accumulated during the 1950s and 1960s have led to a growing disappointment with the main effect approach (cf. Secord, Backman, & Meredith, 1962; Shrauger & Altrocchi, 1964; Tagiury, 1969). Consistent with the general zeitgeist at that time (cf. Mischel, 1968), researchers began to prefer interactive models. Thus, Shrauger and Altrocchi and Tagiury, in two major literature reviews, concluded that the influence of motivational dispositions on person perception is likely to be detected only when the interactive effects of person, situation, and stimulus are considered, and this triple interaction occurs in the presence of strong emotional arousal of the perceivers. The emphasis on emotional arousal as a factor which catalyzes defensive processes in person perception was, of course, stressed by the New Look experiments and is consistent with major theories of defense (Freud, 1936; Sullivan, 1948).

The affect oriented interactive approach proposed by Shrauger and Altrocchi and by Tagiury was supported by the findings of studies on motive related constructs such as authoritarianism (cf. Jones, 1954; Thibaut & Ricken, 1955; Desoto, Kuethe, & Wunderlich, 1960; Kates, 1959), projection (Cohen, 1956), and the repression-sensitization dimension (Eriksen, 1963), but was not examined sufficiently with regard to personality variables which are explicitly defined as motives. It is also important to note that this general approach did not contain an explicit conception of the process by which affect-arousing person by situation interactions influence defensive person perception processes. Such a conception was developed by Assor et al. (1981, 1986), Aronoff and Wilson (1985), and Battistich et al. (1985), and constitutes the third conceptual stage.

III. A PROCESS ORIENTED INTERACTIVE MODEL: EMPHASIS ON DEFENSIVE PROCESSING

The process oriented interactive model which guided Assor, Aronoff, and Messe (1981, 1986) dates back to the New Look, the work of Freud and Sullivan, and the proposals of Shrauger and Altrocchi (1964) and Tagiury (1969). According to this model, a defensive process is understood to originate with the percep-

tion of motive-threatening features of the stimulus that increase the perceiver's autonomic arousal to an unpleasant level. The perceiver then reconstructs a more benign image of the stimulus by denying, misinterpreting, or giving less weight to the threatening aspects of the stimulus. This cognitive reconstruction of the stimulus reduces the unpleasant arousal experienced by perceivers.¹ Affect arousal may have a biasing effect on person perception processes through what can be described as a mood effect. This process may start with the perception of a motive frustrating stimulus which arouses negative emotion, or a motive gratifying stimulus which arouses positive emotion. The reconstruction and final evaluation and memory of the stimulus may be colored by the affect which the stimulus evokes. A similar process was described and demonstrated by Bower (1981) in regard to mood dependent memory and perception. In this review the focus is not on mood dependent processes, as these are not defensive.

Partial demonstrations of the proposed defensive process in the area of person perception were provided by Gur and Sackheim (1979) and Battistich and Aronoff (1985), and especially by Luborsky, Blinder, and Mackworth (1963) and Luborsky, Blinder, and Shimeck (1965). A more complete demonstration was provided by Assor, Aronoff, and Messe (1981, 1986). In their first study, Assor et al. (1981) showed that dominance-motivated individuals evaluate high status and competence target persons more favorably than low status and competence target persons. To account for the mechanism underlying these results it was assumed that the perception of a high status and competence target person poses a considerable threat to the self-concept and dominance expectancies of dominance oriented perceivers. As a result, they experience an unpleasant increase in their autonomic arousal. The devaluation of the high status target person allows high dominance perceivers to reestablish more favorable self-evaluation and future expectancies and therefore reduces their level of autonomic arousal. A second study (Assor et al., 1986), utilizing skin conductance measures of emotion-related autonomic arousal, supported this defensive explanation. In the study it was shown that (a) most dominance oriented perceivers responded to highly dominant future work partners with increased autonomic arousal; and (b) among dominance oriented perceivers, those individuals who devalued their threatening future partners experienced a greater reduction in autonomic arousal. However, it should be noted that, although devaluation was found to be an effective reducer of autonomic arousal (for those participants who utilized it), most high dominance participants in the 1986 study did not show the devaluative tendency manifested by high dominance participants in the 1981 study. A similar result was obtained by Battistich and Aronoff (1985), who found that future partners who posed a threat to perceivers' predominant motives evoked unpleasant feelings and dislike, but were not devalued.

Overall, in the studies cited and described above there is a clear demonstration of the central role of emotional arousal in defensive person perception. However, contrary to the assumptions of the proposed process-oriented model, the research-

ers also indicated that emotional arousal does not necessarily lead to defensive person perception. Other stress and coping researchers (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Janis & Mann, 1977; Lazarus, 1983; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Wortman, 1976) indicate that under conditions of considerable affect arousal, the tendency toward defensive information processing is often resisted and counteracted by a tendency toward accurate and realistic processing. Taken together, these findings suggest that the process oriented model needs to be revised in order to accommodate the increased emphasis on realistic processing of affect arousing stimuli. Such a revision may help to advance present understanding and research and is proposed as the fourth stage of conceptualization.

IV. A REVISED INTERACTIVE MODEL: EMPHASIS ON REALISTIC AND DEFENSIVE PROCESSING

INTRODUCTION

Defensive processing is viewed as aimed at denying or minimizing the threatening aspects of the stimulus person and overemphasizing or overweighting the pleasant and nonthreatening aspects. Realistic processing is viewed as aimed at acquiring accurate and unbiased information about the stimulus person. These two modes of processing are often contradictory. The distinction between defensive and realistic processing is similar to the conceptions advanced by Epstein (1981) and Freud (1937), and is particularly close to Lazarus' (1983) distinction between emotion and problem-focused modes of coping. According to Lazarus, the function of problem focused coping is to change a damaging or threatening relationship between person and environment, whereas the function of emotion focused coping is to regulate the emotional distress produced by that relationship. In line with the assumptions of the revised model, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found that in complex stressful encounters people often use both modes of coping. It is important to note that, in the final analysis, both defensive and realistic processing are aimed at the reduction of emotional distress. However, while defensive (or emotional) processing focuses on the immediate reduction of distress, realistic (or problem oriented) processing focuses on the reduction of anticipated future distress (often at the cost of not reducing present distress).

An examination of the place of the proposed distinction in the writings of researchers in the area of personality and person perception indicates that some investigators did pay attention to personality factors which affect the tendency to engage in defensive vs. realistic processing (e.g., Eriksen, 1963; Shrauger & Altrocchi, 1964). However, these investigators did not describe the situational and stimulus factors, which affect the relative strength of the two modes of processing. The revised model assumes that the tendency to engage in defensive vs. realistic processing is a product of the interaction of personal, situational, and stimulus factors. According to the revised model, perceiver's motives lead to defensive perception of a particular stimulus person only if: (a) the interaction of perceiver's motives with the attributes of the stimulus person and the situation produces

emotional arousal in the perceiver; and (b) the perceiver assumes, due to a combination of personal, stimulus, and situational factors, that defensive processing of information related to the stimulus person has higher hedonic value than realistic processing.

The assumption that the tendency to perceive people defensively is influenced by the relative hedonic value of defensive vs. realistic processing is a central feature of the revised model. According to this assumption, realistic processing intensifies if such processing is perceived as capable of preventing or reducing great future pains or as facilitating the achievement of great future pleasures. Defensive processing of a noxious stimulus intensifies if the present loss or pain linked with that stimulus is experienced by perceivers as difficult to bear.

The following section presents situational and personal factors which determine the hedonic value – and, accordingly, the relative intensity – of the tendencies toward realistic vs. defensive processing in person perception.

DETERMINANTS OF REALISTIC VS. DEFENSIVE PROCESSING

(1) Personal future outcomes When the perceived stimulus is objectively linked with the perceiver's personal future outcomes, the hedonic value of realistic processing increases, and, consequently, the tendency toward realistic processing also increases.

The evidence supporting this assertion comes from a number of sources. Studies of responses to evaluations have shown that individuals with low self-esteem do not respond favorably to highly positive evaluations when they expect to perform a task and be evaluated in the near future. However, positive evaluations are well accepted when future performance or evaluation is not expected (see Jones, 193; Jones & Pines, 1968; Jones & Ratner, 1968; Wylie, 1979). Thus, it appears that persons with low self esteem assign little weight to flattering feedback and pay more attention to inadequate and unpleasant aspects of themselves (and therefore show less defensive and more realistic processing) when a future task or evaluation is expected.

Similarly, individuals who are classified as repressors on Byrne's (1961) measure were found to attend to information describing their personal deficiencies when they expected to perform a difficult task, but avoided this negative personal information when no future task was expected (Mischel, Ebbessen, & Zeiss, 1973). Taken together, these studies suggest that when self related information is closely linked with personal future outcomes (i.e., success in future performance), a realistic mode of processing tends to prevail.

Additional evidence concerning the impact of personal future outcomes on mode of processing is provided by the studies of evaluative reactions to motive threatening target persons performed by Assor et al. (1981, 1986), and Battistich and Aronoff (1985). In the two later studies, but not in the early one, perceivers expected to interact with the target person, and therefore were more likely to perceive him as closely related to their own personal future outcomes. Consistent

with our assumption, participants in the latter studies showed less defensive devaluation of the motive threatening target person than did the participants of the first study. Thus, increased outcome-dependency on the target person was associated with decreased defensive processing.

The notion that the tendency toward defensive processing increases when the perceived stimulus is not linked with the perceiver's personal future outcomes is consistent with the results of a number of other studies. For example, Cialdini and Mirels' (1976) research on the effects of locus of control on the evaluation of the intelligence of frustrating vs. gratifying target persons, Gibbons and Wright's (1981) study on the effects of sex guilt on the perception of sexual arousal; studies by Zaidel and Mehrabian (1969) and Johnson and Gormly (1975) on the effects of need for approval on the encoding of positive vs. negative attitudes, and Solar and Mehrabian (1973) research on the effects of need for affiliation on the evaluation of other people's friendliness.

Overall, the studies reviewed in this section suggest that realistic processing increases when the motivationally relevant stimulus (for example, threatening target persons or significant self-related information) is closely linked with the perceiver's personal future outcomes (for example, future success or failure, or loss of self-esteem or dominance in future interaction), whereas defensive processing increases when the link with personal future outcomes is weak or nonexistent.

(2) Clarity of the link between stimulus and personal future outcomes The connections between stimulus person information and significant personal future outcomes are, at times, disguised, complex, or indirect, and therefore difficult to detect. When the stimulus' association with the perceiver's future outcomes is clear, the hedonic value of realistic processing is emphasized, and consequently the tendency toward realistic processing is likely to increase. According to the same logic, unclear connections are likely to result in decreased realistic processing.

Unclear but strong connections often exist in lasting and close relationships. For example, the damaging effects of a highly protective maternal behavior can be masked by the pleasantness of this behavior or the apparent genuine concern from which it originates. Because this negative hedonic link is difficult to detect, individuals may fail to process information related to it in a realistic way. The recognition of the negative aspects of the above maternal behavior is usually threatening and, therefore, is likely to evoke a defensive mode of processing. However, it is reasonable to assume that this defensive processing would be counteracted by a stronger tendency toward realistic processing if the negative hedonic link was clearer. The clarification of such disguised, yet strong, negative hedonic links is often the task of professional counselors.

(3) Perceivers' ability to sense negative hedonic links: The repression-sensitization dimension Perceivers may fail to sense the connection between stimulus information and negative future outcomes not because the connection is unclear, but because they tend to avoid the recognition of threatening stimuli. This tendency is captured by the well-known repression-sensitization dimension (Byrne, 1961), as

well as other measures of defensive orientation (Gleser and Ihillevitch, 1969). A repressive disposition is likely to lead to decreased realistic processing of information related to negative future outcomes, whereas the reverse is true for a sensitizing disposition. Eriksen (1963), Shrauger and Altrocchi (1964), Graziano, Brothorn, and Berscheid, (1980), and Mischel et al. (1973), found that sensitizers are more likely to engage in nondefensive realistic processing than are repressors.

(4) Hope that realistic processing will help Researchers have shown that people who think that they can do little or nothing in order to cope successfully with a threatening stimulus tend to respond with decreased vigilance and problem focused coping and increased defensiveness and emotion-focused coping (cf. Folkins, 1970; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Janis & Mann, 1977; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Lazarus, 1983; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Monat et al., 1972; Wortman, 1976).

Based on these findings, it is reasonable to assume that the tendency toward realistic processing of motive-relevant information increases when perceivers think that such processing will help them to prevent or minimize future losses. It is important to note that perceivers' level of hope is determined not only by the objective circumstances, but also by their own subjective appraisal of their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and their appraisal of the objective circumstances (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

(5) Potency of present negative feelings produced by the stimulus Research in personality and person perception (particularly the New Look tradition) has emphasized that the tendency toward defensive processing increases when perceivers experience strong negative feelings (Assor et al., 1981, 1986; Eriksen, 1963; Eriksen & Pierce, 1968; Luborsky, Blinder & Mackworth, 1963; Luborsky, Blinder, & Schimek, 1965; McGinnes, 1949). It is reasonable to assume that the tendency toward defensive processing will be particularly strong when perceivers experience a very high level of emotional arousal. High arousal has often been shown to have a disorganizing impact on thought and behavior (Sarason, 1961, 1980; Spence & Spence, 1966), and therefore is likely to interfere with realistic problem-oriented processing. As a result, perceivers are likely to lose hope regarding the effectiveness of such processing and lean toward a defensive, simplistic and stereotypic mode of processing (cf. Ray, Katahn, & Synder, 1971; Spence & Spence, 1966).

(6) Personality factors affecting the intensity of emotional arousal or the capacity to tolerate and control this arousal A number of personality variables were found to predict an increased emotional and physiological arousal in response to intense stimulation (e.g., emotionality – Buss & Plomin, 1975; introversion and neuroticism – Eysenck, 1967; intensity of affective response – Thomas & Chess, 1977). The role of personality and temperament factors as determinants of increased reactivity is especially clear in the case of punishing and threatening stimuli (cf. Rothbart, 1982; Goldsmith & Campos, 1982; Gray, 1972; Spielberger, 1966). As indicated earlier, increased negative emotional arousal produces an increased pressure toward defensive processing. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that individuals scoring high on variables associated with increased emotional reactivity are more

inclined to employ defensive processing. Another type of individual disposition likely to affect one's mode of processing is ego control (Block & Block, 1980) or impulsivity (Buss & Plomin, 1975; Eysenck, 1967; Messer, 1976). It can be assumed that individuals scoring high on ego control and low on impulsivity are more likely to engage in realistic processing because: (a) they are more capable of tolerating high emotional arousal and therefore are less inclined to use defensive processing in order to reduce their distress; and (b) they are more inclined to think about the future outcomes of their behavior, and, as noted earlier, consideration of future outcomes increases the tendency toward realistic processing.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the research reviewed in this article clearly shows that, although defensive effects of motives on person perception are not so pervasive as assumed by Homey and other early theorists, such effects can easily be detected and demonstrated in studies employing a process-oriented interactive perspective.

It is interesting to note that the transition from a main effect to an interactive approach and from an exclusive emphasis on defensive processing to an emphasis on defensive and realistic processing parallels some major developments in psychoanalytic thought. Thus, early psychoanalysts emphasized the defensive nature of perceptual and cognitive processes and the domination of these processes by instinctual wishes, whereas the later theorists of ego psychology (cf. Hartman, 1956; Rapaport, 1957; White, 1963) viewed thought and perception as less defensive, more reality oriented, and not completely dominated by instinctual wishes.

The revised model suggests that defensive effects of motives on person perception are likely to occur primarily in contexts which are highly frustrating or gratifying for perceivers' motives, and therefore evoke considerable emotional arousal. This, of course, is not typically the case in laboratory experiments (as already noted by Shrauger & Altrocchi, 1964) but is often true for lasting relationships. For example, a clinging or dominating wife or boss may frustrate the perceiver's need for autonomy. However, because these people can cause him significant losses or gains, he will tend to perceive them in a realistic way. Perhaps, the emotion aroused under such conditions will be displaced and will influence the perception and evaluation of people on whom the perceiver is less outcome-dependent (for example, a weak subordinate or a "scapegoat" child). The initially suppressed tendency toward defensive processing may become more predominant after the need for realistic processing has passed (i.e., the perceiver becomes less outcome-dependent on the stimulus person) or when the perceiver has lost hope that realistic processing would help in coping with the frustrating target person. Thus, it is possible that the effects of motives on person perception are often delayed or displaced.

Studies designed to detect displaced and delayed effects may reveal that defen-

sive influences of motives on person perception are indeed pervasive and, perhaps as proposed by Allport (1961) and Maslow (1970), it is a rare case that interpersonal perceptions in the context of lasting and meaningful relationships are not colored and biased by personal traits and motives.

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