Part 6 **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

**20 Social cognition**

The self in social context

* How we perceive ourselves exerts an influence on our social behaviour. Our self-perceptions are not accurate but are shaped by self-defence.
* We are, for example, prone to self-serving bias, making judgements that we overestimate our contributions to tasks, overestimate our positive attributes, and take credit for successes but make excuses for our failures.
* We also tend to experience positive illusions in the form of uncritically positive self-views, illusions of control, and unrealistic optimism.
* We make social comparisons for a number of reasons, including self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-defence.

Changing the self

* Self-evaluation can lead us to wish to engage in a process of self-change, often involving development of self-regulation.
* An important aspect of self-regulation is self-control. Self-control means resistance to an impulse to satisfy an immediate goal or need.
* Studies like Mischel’s ‘marshmallow’ experiments have demonstrated that even young children have some capacity for self-control, and that self-control predicts positive outcomes.
* Baumeister has proposed a ‘strength’ model of self-control, in which self-control functions like muscular strength, becoming fatigued after exertion and developing with practice.

Attribution

* Another important aspect of social cognition involves explaining others’—and on occasion our own—actions. This is called attribution. The most basic distinction is between attributing actions to the situation and to the disposition of the actor.
* Where we have only access to a single incident we can make use of correspondent inferences to judge the actor’s intentions. This makes use of what we know about awareness of consequences, ability to carry out the action, and the deliberate nature of the action.
* Where we have further information about how the individual usually behaves in similar and different situations and about how others tend to behave in the situation we can use covariation to make attributions.
* Where someone consistently displays a behaviour over time and in different situations and where this differs from the behaviour typical of others we are more likely to make dispositional attributions.
* There is some evidence for the fundamental attribution error—the idea that we tend to overestimate the importance of disposition as opposed to the situation. However, this is controversial and there is evidence to suggest that the reverse is true when making attributions about our own actions.

Attitudes

* Attitudes can be described as ‘summary evaluations’ of both concrete and abstract concepts. Attitudes have cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects.
* Attitudes vary in strength. Attitude strength is affected by its emotional intensity, expertise in the subject of the attitude, and by its accessibility, how fast and automatically it is activated.
* Attitudes serve a range of psychological purposes. Utilitarian functions are concerned with simplifying responses to the world and keeping the person safe. Symbolic functions serve more complex needs like social identity and signalling of group membership and virtues.

Sometimes attitudes correspond closely with our actions. However, they do not always do so and this can result in cognitive dissonance, which can be resolved by changing the attitude, changing the behaviour, or changing beliefs about the behaviour that corresponds to the attitude.