

phase 2

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

unit **2.4**

March 17

Themes:

The Social Construction of Reality:

- perception and evaluation;
- the psychology of attribution;
- the dynamics of social action (and inaction)
- individuality/commonality cleavage and the systemic perspective of interdependence

FACILITATION:

Study Group #4

PREPARATION OVERVIEW:

READ by **yourself**

then

DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.4 – 1 Aronson, SA: Chapter 4: Social Cognition (pp. 92-141)

2.4 – 2 Hardin, G. (1968) The Tragedy of the Commons
with comment by Crowe, Beryl (1969) The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited

on line at:

<http://www.constitution.org/cmt/tragcomm.htm>

2.4 – 3 Macy, J.R., (1983) Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age (excerpts)

THINK OVER by **yourself**

then

DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.4 – 2 The Tragedy of the Commons

Hardin's classic article poses some essential socio-psychological questions about attitudes toward ecological issues.

The crucial aspect for the social-psychological context is the cleavage between individuality and commonality. The "Tragedy" reflects the prevalent cultural perspective whereby the interests of the individual and the community are understood as opposed and contradictory. Self-interest is consequently identified with selfishness and greed. Arguably, the choice of herdsmen (as one of the first occupations humans have taken) is rather inappropriate to illustrate a behavior that is characteristic of less ancient cultural patterns, and particularly typical for the current economy of cut-throat competition.

This relation between self-interest and selfishness presents a major conflict and may readily engender a feeling of abject despair for the human condition. This is particularly true when the "tragedy" is framed in the customary dualist (either/or) mode. Under these conditions, the two ethical alternatives that offer themselves are either utilitarianism or deontology. In other words, one will either accept to be selfish and greedy (because that is an inevitable consequence of pursuing and maximizing one's utility), or will adopt a "disinterested moral obligation" regardless of self-interest (which is the definition of deontology).

However, from the systemic perspective, this counter-position of self- versus common-interest presents a dialectic tension in which the integrity of the individual system depends on its belonging to and interrelatedness with more inclusive systems. This dialectic tension does not imply a mutual exclusion or irreconcilability of individual and common (or communal) interests. Rather, the systemic interrelations entail an interconnectedness of interests. Giving and taking can be conceived of only as complementary processes in eco-systemic interaction of individuals with each other and with the surrounding environment (social and natural).

The systemic perspective is, however, not readily attained. Why not? Perhaps the main reason is that our cognitive capacity to reason is clearly impaired by our affective response to so much "bad news." Indeed, this is precisely the thesis presented in the in the following selection:

2.4 – 3 Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age

This important book, now sadly out of print, was written in 1983, in the midst of an escalating nuclear arms race between the US and USSR. In it Macy uses the fear of nuclear annihilation to show precisely how we deal with information that is threatening to our personal security. She offers an explanation of what has been called "the dynamics of inaction." Arguably, her thesis has contemporary relevance. Do you see it as applicable to current events? If so how? If not, why not?

Making Sense of the World:

Our attention is thus drawn to the question of how we choose to make sense of the world. And this is the essence of what Aronson means by "social cognition." Consider the following questions and issues:

- What does it mean to say that rational thinkers are cognitive misers?
- What are the effects of contexts on judgments, perception, attractiveness, reference points?
- What is "priming"?
- What is meant by "construct accessibility"?
- What is impression formation?
- Can you identify some common "impression management" techniques?
- What effects follow from different ways of framing situations/decisions?

Aronson has quite a lot to say about "heuristics." Define and distinguish between:

- judgement heuristics
- representative instances
- availability heuristic
- attitude heuristic
- halo effects
- false consensus effects
- categories and stereotypes

Describe and discuss "the self-fulfilling nature of social expectations"

- What is meant by "reconstructive memory"? How does this relate to the questionable validity of "memories recovered from childhood?" to the reliability of eye witness testimony?
- Define "confirmation bias," "hindsight bias," "actor-observer bias," "self bias," "self-serving bias."
- Explain the fact that attitudes (as measured by responses to questionnaires) are generally not predictive of or highly correlated with observed behavior.
- What is "the fundamental attribution error"?

Note: In any given situation, people will behave in accordance with their social roles – acting differently in different situations. Perhaps one reason we attribute other people's behavior to underlying personality traits is that we observe them in only a few situations and are actually observing how they play the stipulated role therein (e.g. teammate, classmate or teacher). Consider your own behavior. Are there respects in which you play different roles in different situations? Give some examples. How can you manage to do so while also remaining "yourself"? If all of your personas were to gather together in a room to discuss the kind of person you **really** are, would they all agree in their assessments of you? What would they be likely to say about you?

Formative Evaluation Note:

Midterm Formative and (Interim) Summative Evaluations Due
(Details of what they should contain, of format, exact deadline etc., will be determined in class.)