

# Social Cognition

## The Schema Theory

A **schema** can be defined as a cognitive structure, which represents a person's knowledge in a specific area.

For e.g., you have a schema about what is involved in studying psychology, what sort of things happens in classes, where to find information etc. This schema allows you to build up on your previous experiences without starting from the beginning which as a result, cuts down on the amount needed to be processed.

**Disadvantages of schemas** include focusing on an aspect of a situation where we may overlook something which is critical and then come to an inaccurate conclusion.

We also have schemas for groups of people who share the same characteristic - these are called **stereotypes**.

**Heuristics** can be defined as problem-solving strategies which involve taking the most probable or likely option. Some important types of heuristics used in social cognition are representativeness, anchoring and availability.

**Representativeness** - deciding whether a particular person or event falls into a particular category simply on that basis of how representative they are of members of that category.

**Availability** - refers to the judging the likelihood of an event on the basis of the number of instances which come to mind, i.e. are available.

**Anchoring** - when we have insufficient information to draw firm conclusions, i.e., making use of related information as an 'anchor' to help us in our judgements.

## The primary-recency effect

The primary-recency effect looks at the effect on the impression we have of other people of the order in which we are given information. If people are asked to learn a list of words, they typically remember those at the start and at the end better than those in the middle.

The better recall for the first few words is called the primacy effect, whereas the words at the end of the list are known as the recency effect.

By associating '**primacy**' with 'pre' (meaning before), it's easier to remember that primacy effect is used for words at the beginning while the other one, recency, is used for words at the end.

### **Real world implications**

Pennington (1982) discovered that when participants were asked to read an account of a rape trial, varying the order of information presented, he found that guilty verdicts were more likely when the strongest prosecution evidence was even first.