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SOCIAL PERCEPTION – HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE EACH OTHER

Abstract: The article analyses the theory of perception of human behaviours in the context of contacts between staff members and clients. It presents the psychological mechanisms and barriers which cause intensified deformations of perception. The article analyses the role of first impressions in contact with clients, the attribution process and attribution errors. It describes methods of controlling perception and understanding people better. The article stresses the importance of knowledge, improvement of social skills and development of empathy in order to limit and eliminate deformations of perception and create conditions for better communication and cooperation.

Keywords: perception, perception errors, first impression, attribution, attribution errors, controlling perception, empathy

INTRODUCTION

One of more important human skills is the perception of people's behaviours, understanding their causes and consequences for interpersonal relations. The ability to understand one's own behaviours, being aware of their influence on the reactions of individuals and seeing how other people influence us are equally important and very difficult skills in interpersonal contacts. This social perception of people, their mental states and personal traits in a broad sense takes place during the process of interaction between them. In many occupational situations, e.g. in contacts with clients, adequate perception has fundamental influence on interpersonal relations and communication. However, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that the perception of other people is a complex and selective process [Hartley 2006]. This means that we evaluate other people and give opinions about them too soon and too hastily. Human perception is a subjective process – we perceive others through the prism of our earlier experience. We become deluded, being guided by superficial first impressions as well as seeing and hearing what we like. It is so because we need to confirm that the information present in our mind is in agreement with the information received [Adler et al. 2007]. Errors and deformations of perception become more intense because of different physiological, cultural, social and psychological factors [Adler et al. 2007].

Among these factors there are negative stereotypes of a shop assistant, clerk or difficult client, which affect our attitude and behaviour towards these people. It is necessary to distinguish between a client's negative attitude to a particular institution, company or a category of services and the attitude to a particular individual. It is an important problem, because when one's job involves regular contacts with clients, where it is necessary to assess people and cooperate with them, inadequate perception may cause negative consequences. It is particularly important when it is necessary to assess a client's credibility and understand the motives of their conduct. These are essential elements in a job involving client service.

Social psychologists have revealed that the process of perceiving people entails numerous errors and deformations, where first impressions are particularly important [Leary 2003].

First impressions are made during the first seconds of contact e.g. with a client. During this short time a person's image is formed. It is long-lasting, resistant to change and it strongly influences an individual's behaviour. The first impressions experienced by a client contacting a staff member are very important. Therefore, they should not be ignored. On the contrary, it is necessary to take due care so as to guarantee that the first impressions are as good as possible. Therefore, it is worth remembering that a person's image is based on the following elements:

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- external features (appearance),
- generally acceptable good manners,
- neat surroundings in a place where the client is met (it expresses one's attitude to the client and their own business).

A staff member represents the company and makes the first impression on the client. Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that the client is well served at the very moment they have contact with the company. A professional client-oriented attitude and behaviour should be manifested by the following reactions:

- paying attention to the client,
- establishing eye contact,
- open body posture,
- using simple words, which are easy to understand,
- smile,
- nice tone of voice,
- voice modulation,
- relaxed speech tempo,
- maintaining appropriate distance in space.

The client registers not only what they can hear but also what they can see. Apart from words spoken, an individual also sends signals through their body language and vocalisation, usually not being aware of this fact [Sobczak-Matysiak 1997].

The role of first impressions in the creation of another person's image is indicated not only by common observations but also by numerous results of studies. Scientific research has revealed that people tend to make attributions. It means that they try to draw conclusions about human behaviours, their causes, emotional states and traits of personality. This complex cognitive process consists in attributing a specific meaning and motives to a particular person and their behaviour [Stewart 2014].

The human tendency to go beyond available data and observations in contact with other people causes a large number of attribution errors, including [Crips 2015]:

- concentration on an external situation without noticing the causes of another person's behaviour (e.g. tapping one's fingers on a desk is perceived as a sign of being in a hurry rather than as a bad manner or being nervous),
- underrating the influence of one's own behaviour on another person's behaviour (e.g. a client's excessive compliance or aggressiveness is largely the consequence of a staff member's behaviour and situational context),
- individual differences between people's private concepts of personality and its traits (so-called hidden theories of personality). People often consider what is in their minds rather than their observations of another person's behaviour [Argyle 1999],
- the effect of first impressions, which consists of the influence of first information on our perception of another person and their resulting behaviour. According to R. Rosenthal & L. Jacobson, we can observe not only the effect of first impressions but also the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, the information that the client appreciates us and our company makes us treat them in a more rewarding and encouraging manner than other clients [Aronson et al.1994]. The presence of these mechanisms explains why two people may perceive a particular client in a completely different way. Although they currently have the same information about the client, but their first impressions were different,



- the halo effect is another example of deformation of the perception of other people. The effect can be positive or negative. It is positive when one positive trait (e.g. one's good image) causes us to attribute other positive traits to this person (e.g. high intelligence). A negative halo effect occurs when finding one negative trait in a person (e.g. obesity) causes us to attribute other negative traits to this person (e.g. laziness) [Argyle 1999].

The halo effect has double significance in contacts with clients. It is necessary to be aware of the reciprocal nature of first impressions and the tendency to formulate reciprocal assessments. It is possible to make errors of perception and hasty generalisation. It is worth remembering that the effects of deformed perception of other people have unconscious nature and positive or negative traits can be unfoundedly attributed to other people. The knowledge of this fact may prevent serious errors in assessing clients and prevent the consequences of these misjudgements.

Distorted perception also affects communication. It is the main argument that speaks in favour of learning the methods of controlling perception and better understanding of other people.

Social psychologists indicate the following two tools:

- control of observations,
- development of empathy.

Control of observations is a method of sharing one's interpretation with others. Full control consists of three elements: description of behaviour, giving two possible interpretations of this behaviour and asking for explanation how to interpret it. Control of observations is an example of a cooperative approach to communication, because apart from improved adequacy of perception, it also signals the attitude of respect and concern about another person, e.g. 'I don't know if you're kidding or serious.' [Adler et al. 2007]. Control of observations makes the process of information decoding more adequate. However, it does not provide enough information to understand another person fully. Full understanding requires another ability, i.e. empathy. It is defined as the capacity to reconstruct another person's frame of reference and experience the world from their point of view [Adler et al. 2007, p. 94].

There are three dimensions of empathy:

- intellectual (related with a change of perspective) – it is the ability to adopt another person's point of view,
- affective (related with emotions) – it is the ability to experience the same feelings due to the spreading of emotions,
- concern for another person's good.

It is very important for the person who is perceived empathically that there is someone who shows concern for them, listens to them and does not make judgements. This is how they can learn to trust other people, improve their self-esteem and in consequence, it is possible to find and keep one's clients [Adler et al. 2007, pp. 96-98].

CONCLUSIONS

Mutual perception and understanding is a serious challenge. Physiological deformations, psychological barriers and sociocultural conditions create distance between people. However, the knowledge and improvement of psychosocial skills, the development of empathic capacity and the determination to level deformed perceptions favours building bridges of understanding between people. It is the only way to achieve appropriate and satisfying interpersonal relations.



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