
Distorted first impressions: can social and cultural factors influence perception?

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Résumé

Duration: 2h30 (25 min talks + 15 min questions + 30 min roundtable)

The aim of this symposium is to explore the role that social and cultural factors play in shaping our perceptual experience, and how, in turn, this socially and culturally shaped perception may influence our understanding of the world around us. Studying the role of social and cultural influences on perception is crucial to explaining how perception works. For example, it has recently been argued that social and cultural factors can shape perception to make it attuned to social categories by a process of implicit perceptual learning (Ransom, 2024). It has also been argued that perceptual biases challenge the traditional divide between seeing and reasoning (Siegel, 2017). Finally, social influences on perception may undermine its reliability as a source of knowledge (Munton, 2017).

The talks of the symposium will be articulated around three central issues. 1) Can perception be shaped by cultural and societal norms, and how might this explain some of our gender biases (Carranante)? 2) Can our embodied nature explain the origins of biased perception (Clavel)? 3) Are there cases of systematically biased perceptual states that challenge perception's role as a reliable source of knowledge about others (Smortchkova)?

A roundtable discussion will focus on some related issues raised during the presentations. What is the nature of perceptual bias, and how does it differ from cognitive bias, which has been more extensively explored in the literature? What are the mechanisms involved in biased perception? Is there a unified category of "biased perception" which systematically downgrades our perceptual knowledge? Is it possible to eliminate biases from perception?

References

Munton, Jessie (2017). Perceptual Skill And Social Structure. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 99 (1):131-161.

*Intervenant

Ransom, Madeleine (2024). The perceptual learning of socially constructed kinds: how culture biases and shapes perception. *Philosophical Studies* 181 (11):3113-3133.

Siegel, Susanna (2017). *The Rationality of Perception*. Oxford University Press.

Talk 1: Geraldine Carranante (CAPHI, Nantes Université).

Ordinary perception and male-gaze aesthetics

Recent empirical works show that the perceptual mechanisms underlying the perception of sexualized female bodies resemble those of object perception, while the mechanisms involved in the perception of sexualized male bodies correspond to the perception of an agent (Vaes et al, 2019). The phenomenon of visual objectification of female bodies in automatic perception suggests a nativist hypothesis, according to which the objectification of women's bodies is grounded in innate perceptual capacities. The aim of my talk is to reject the nativist hypothesis and argue instead that the difference in the way gendered bodies are perceived results from cultural influences on perceptual learning. The mechanism responsible for the effect amounts to visual learning through the normative framework of male-gaze aesthetics (Eaton, 2008), which shapes our visual engagements with gendered bodies. Through its powerful influence this aesthetic norm alters ordinary perception, blurring the boundary between everyday and aesthetic vision.

References

Eaton, Anne (2008) "Feminist Philosophy of Art" *Philosophy Compass* 3/5 (2008): 873–893.

Vaes, J. et al (2019). Assessing neural responses towards objectified human targets and objects to identify processes of sexual objectification that go beyond the metaphor. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 6699

Talk 2: Jimena Clavel (Tilburg University), Situated Perception and Embedded Predictive Processing

How do social circumstances make a difference to perception? Predictive processing can fruitfully contribute to answering this question. This has been proposed by, e.g., Jessie Munton (2019), who focuses on the pernicious effects of social influences in perception. For her, social circumstances play a role in the way perceivers deploy perceptual skills. In cases in which perception relies on previous information that has been covertly manipulated, however, this influence leads to epistemic loss. Munton's description of perceptual systems is of systems that work well unless they are plugged into the wrong environment. This, however, doesn't allow us to fully articulate the precise way in which perception is socially shaped and, thus, the ways in which it leads to epistemic loss. The aim of this paper is to propose an alternative framework. I begin by drawing on the phenomenological notion of situatedness (De Beauvoir 1997). Secondly, I draw on embodied and ecological interpretations of predictive processing to incorporate this concept (e.g., Bruineberg et al. 2018). Thirdly, I argue that perceivers are not neutral systems interacting with socially charged environments. The upshot of this approach is that it allows for a more nuanced assessment of the epistemic situation of perceivers.

References

Bruineberg, J., Kiverstein, J., & Rietveld, E. (2018). The anticipating brain is not a scientist: the free-energy principle from an ecological-enactive perspective. *Synthese*, 195, 2417–2444.

De Beauvoir, S. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley (ed.)). Vintage.

Munton, J. (2019). Perceptual Skill And Social Structure. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 99(1), 131– 161.

Talk 3: Joulia Smortchkova (IPHIG, Grenoble Alpes Université)

Social perceptual illusions and mind misreading

Psychologists use the expression "social perception" to talk about the different types of inferences we use to understand others from their behaviors. I will focus on social perception understood more narrowly as the non-cognitive, non-inferential appraisal of another person's social category, such as their apparent gender, social status, etc., based on sensory cues. In this narrow sense, to perceive another's social category means to experience or represent it in perceptual content. This raises the issue whether perception is a reliable source of knowledge about others. If we can form perceptual beliefs about social properties simply from the way others look (or sound), this broaches the possibility of "social perceptual illusions" which systematically mislead us about others. I will argue such illusions include first impressions formed on the basis of facial traits, such as impressions of niceness, competence, dominance and so on (Todorov, 2017). I will also argue that social perceptual illusions should be included among the sources of systematic mind misreading (Spaulding, 2016), alongside misleading heuristics and information processing errors.

References

Todorov, A. (2017). *Face value: The irresistible influence of first impressions*. Princeton University Press.

Spaulding, S. (2016). Mind Misreading. *Philosophical Issues* 26 (1).

Mots-Clés: perception, bias, cognition incarnée, "regard masculin" en esthétique, mindreading, connaissance perceptuelle