

DEDICATION

As this issue was moving to press, we lost our beloved mentor, colleague, and friend, Nalini Ambady (1959–2013). Nalini's scientific vision and unwavering generosity touched many of the authors who are featured in these pages. As a scholar, Nalini's keen insights fundamentally changed the way the field understands and thinks about social perception, helping establish and foster new and transformative fields of study including thin-slices of interpersonal perception, cultural neuroscience, and of course social vision. As a mentor to many, Nalini tirelessly supported and encouraged others to pursue good science. It is with great sadness and profound gratitude that we dedicate this issue to Nalini's memory.

SOCIAL VISION: AN INTRODUCTION

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The field of Social Cognition was born of an important merging between two disparate domains of psychological research. Social psychology had long been interested in how social factors impinge on impression formation; cognitive psychology had long sought to understand how the mind orients toward, processes, and remembers information in the environment. The merging of these two perspectives yielded Social Cognition, an approach that fundamentally changed both social and cognitive psychology.

In much the same way, an exciting merging is under way at the nexus of Vision Sciences and Social Psychology.

Because vision perceptions occur so early in the cognitive stream, vision scientists had long presumed that such perceptions were the product of a strictly feed-forward system. Accordingly, low-level visual percepts were presumed to be impenetrable and isolated from higher cognitive processing and motivations. Such assumptions were sufficient to understand perception involving objects that have little inherent meaning (e.g., Gabor patches). Recently, however, vision scientists have discovered the important role of top-down modulation even on low-level object recognition. If top-down influences guide our perception of basic objects,

it should come as no surprise that they also influence our perceptions of the most important class of objects in our perceptual environment—other people. Consequently, classic models of visual perception fell short in their ability to characterize the complexities of social perception.

Social psychologists too have begun to recognize the importance of understanding how vision shapes social perception. More of the human brain is dedicated to visual processes than to all other sensory modalities combined. This anatomical fact reflects the central importance vision plays in both establishing and navigating us through our social worlds. Indeed, the visual system is particularly attuned to social cues in the environment. As a result, we are able to accurately “see” others’ mental and emotional states, understanding their desires and intentions and even detecting stable personality traits. What we see informs our first impressions and guides our ongoing interactions with them. Our impressions influence the very way we process even low-level visual information. Likewise, from very little visual information we are able to access remarkably accurate impressions of others.

It is this reciprocal exchange that weds social and visual perception and from which future cross-disciplinary exchange will offer new and fruitful insights.

We call this important work *Social Vision*. A “social vision” approach is gaining traction in the fields of social cognition and vision sciences as evidenced by two recent edited volumes, *The Science of Social Vision* and *The Social Psychology of Visual Perception*. This special issue of *Social Cognition* addresses this emergent field by showcasing numerous brief reports to sample and highlight this exciting area of research.

Although it would be natural to parse the Social Vision literature into areas denoting distinct visual channels (e.g., face perception, body perception), or even by more superficial methodological overlaps, we instead identify works within this special issue in terms of functional similarities. In doing so, we hope to highlight the deep issues involved in this flourishing field.

The malleability inherent in social perceptions occurs via two distinct routes that produce perceptual biases—one inherent in the target of perception (Target Effects), the other inherent in the perceiver (Perceiver Effects). The term *Target Effects* refers to social perceptual biases that occur because common phenotypic cues either forecast similar underlying meaning or physically resemble another, or both across multiple social categories. Put differently, certain social cues can be confounded on a conceptual level and at the level of the stimulus itself. Such effects are now well documented for important intersections of social categories, including sex and emotion, sex and race, and race and emotion. Importantly, because these categories share meaning and common cues, their perception becomes inextricably tethered and produces biases that can be either accentuated or attenuated, depending on the unique combination of cues and categories. The first works in this volume are characterized by a focus on the social perceptual implications when cues to multiple social categories share informational value. We also showcase work that demonstrates how social factors influence even low-level visual processing, sometimes biasing, sometimes fine-tuning our visual acuity.

The obvious complement to a section that emphasizes effects that originate in the target of perception is to also include a section that highlights effects that originate

in the perceiver. The term *Perceiver Effects* refers to social perceptual attunements and biases that occur because of existing knowledge structures (e.g., stereotypes) or motivations that are inherent to the perceiver. Such effects are now well documented for the disambiguation of social and nonsocial stimuli alike. Importantly, this work demonstrates that prior expectations and knowledge impinge on visual perception to systematically bias or refine our perception of the world and other people within it. The second set of works is characterized by a focus on how perceptions (of people and objects) are biased by motivations and prior beliefs.

One final component of a Social Vision approach is that, in day-to-day perceptual experiences, Target and Perceiver Effects unfold in tandem (*Relational Effects*). Interactive Effects represent effects that are inherently bound to the relationship between the perceiver and the target (e.g., same-sex, same-race), and factors that are perceived within a target that alter one's sensory experience. When confronted with certain others, people can also elect to look away, walk away, or more closely inspect them, and the response has implications for impression formation. Whereas such effects are frequently studied in isolation, that is not always the case. The interdependent aspects of social perception are often apparent *within* empirical research. The final set of works is thus characterized by a focus on the relation between the perceiver and the target of perception.

Collectively, the works in this volume represent the burgeoning field of Social Vision, highlighting the diversity of both questions and methods being tackled by a growing group of scholars.

REFERENCES

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