

Lecture 5

Social Cognition

Social cognition –
the process of
thinking about and
making sense of
oneself and others

Part I: The Social Thinker

Part II: Conserving
Mental Effort

Part II: Managing Self
Image

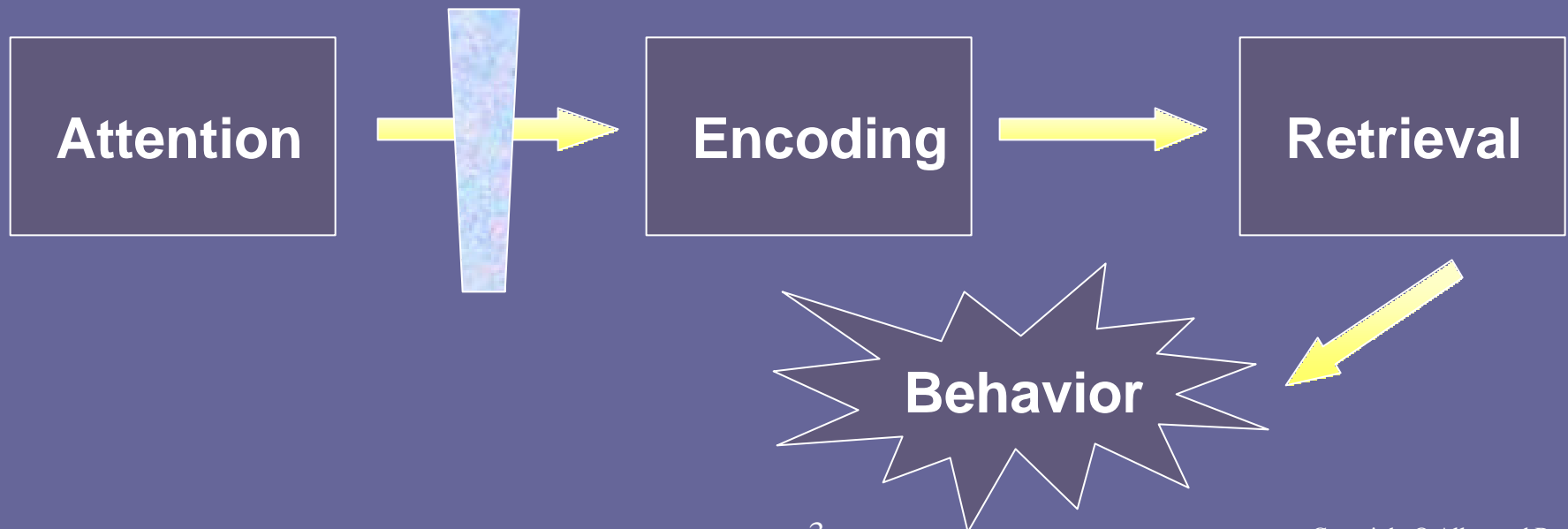
Part I: The Social Thinker

In's and Out's of Social Cognition

Basics of social cognition important from all theoretical perspectives

How does the brain work?

Judging



Four Core Processes of Social Cognition

Attention

Interpretation

Judgment

Memory

Four Core Processes of Social Cognition

Attention –

the process of consciously focusing on features of the environment or oneself

Attention is limited, and different people may focus on different features of the same situation.

Four Core Processes of Social Cognition

Interpretation –

the process through which we give meaning to the events we experience

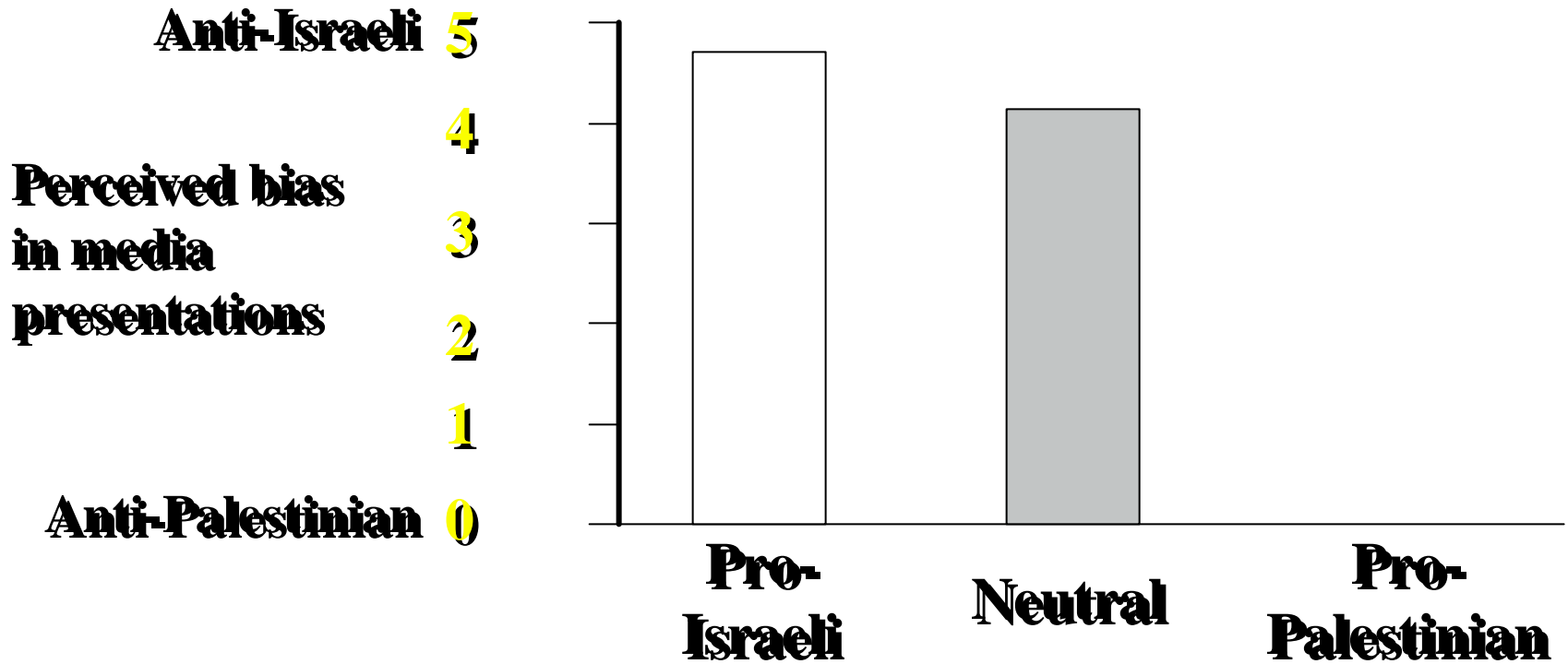
Many social situations can be interpreted in more than one way.



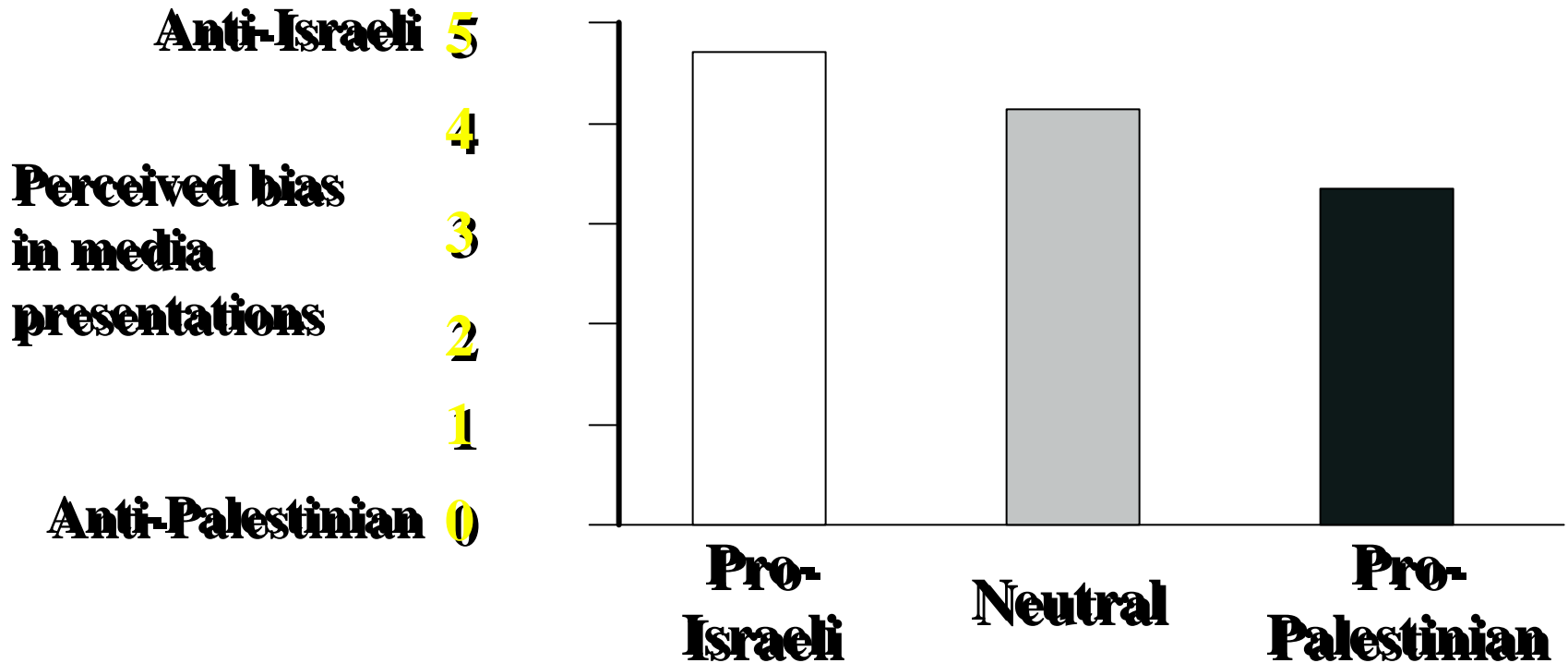
Research

Is Media Bias in the Eye of the Beholder?

In one study, students with pro-Israel or pro-Palestine views watched identical news broadcasts of a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.



Compared to neutral students, pro-Israeli students thought the presentations were biased against Israelis.



But pro-Palestinian students thought the opposite – that the reports were biased against Palestinians.

Four Core Processes of Social Cognition

Judgment –

the process of using information to form impressions and make decisions

Because we often have limited information, many social judgments are “best guesses.”

Four Core Processes of Social Cognition

Memory –

storing and retrieving information for future use

Memory can influence our decisions by affecting what we pay attention to, and how we interpret it.

The Goals of Social Cognition

Conserving Mental Effort

Managing Self-Image

Seeking Accuracy

Part II: Conserving Mental Effort

The Complex,
Information-Rich
Social World

The Limited Human
Attentional Capacity



GOAL: Conserving Mental Effort



Simplification Strategies:
Expectations
Dispositional Inferences
Other Cognitive Shortcuts

Conserving Mental Effort

We often think in ways that tend to preserve our expectations

We pay attention to behaviors relevant to our expectations.

We interpret ambiguous events/behaviors in ways that support our expectations.

We remember people and events consistent with our expectations.

Heuristics

One of the most important ways that we overcome information overload is through the use of *heuristics*-mental shortcuts, or **strategies**, that allow fast and usually correct processing of information.

- 1.) Representativeness Heuristic
- 2.) Availability Heuristic
- 3.) Regression to the mean

1.) Representativeness Heuristic

One important decision we often must make is “in what category does this person belong?” (how similar is A to B ?)

The more similar an individual is to the typical members of a given group, the more likely we are to decide that the individual is a member of that group.

Categorization by representativeness allows us to rapidly assume much information about a person without having to take the time to determine if it is true.

But, because there often are important differences between members of a category or group, this *gap-filling* may lead us astray.

Use of the representativeness heuristic may also produce some important violations of statistical reasoning. One example is the *conjunction error*.

Bill is 34 years old. He is intelligent, but unimaginative, compulsive, and generally lifeless. In school, he was strong in mathematics but weak in social studies and humanities.

Below are statements about Bill. Rank order the statements according to how likely they are to be true of Bill (1=most likely).

_____ Bill is a physician who plays poker for a hobby.

_____ Bill is an architect.

_____ Bill is an accountant.

_____ Bill plays jazz for a hobby.

_____ Bill surfs for a hobby.

_____ Bill is a reporter.

_____ Bill is an accountant who plays jazz for a hobby.

_____ Bill climbs mountains for a hobby.

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_____ *Bill is an accountant.*

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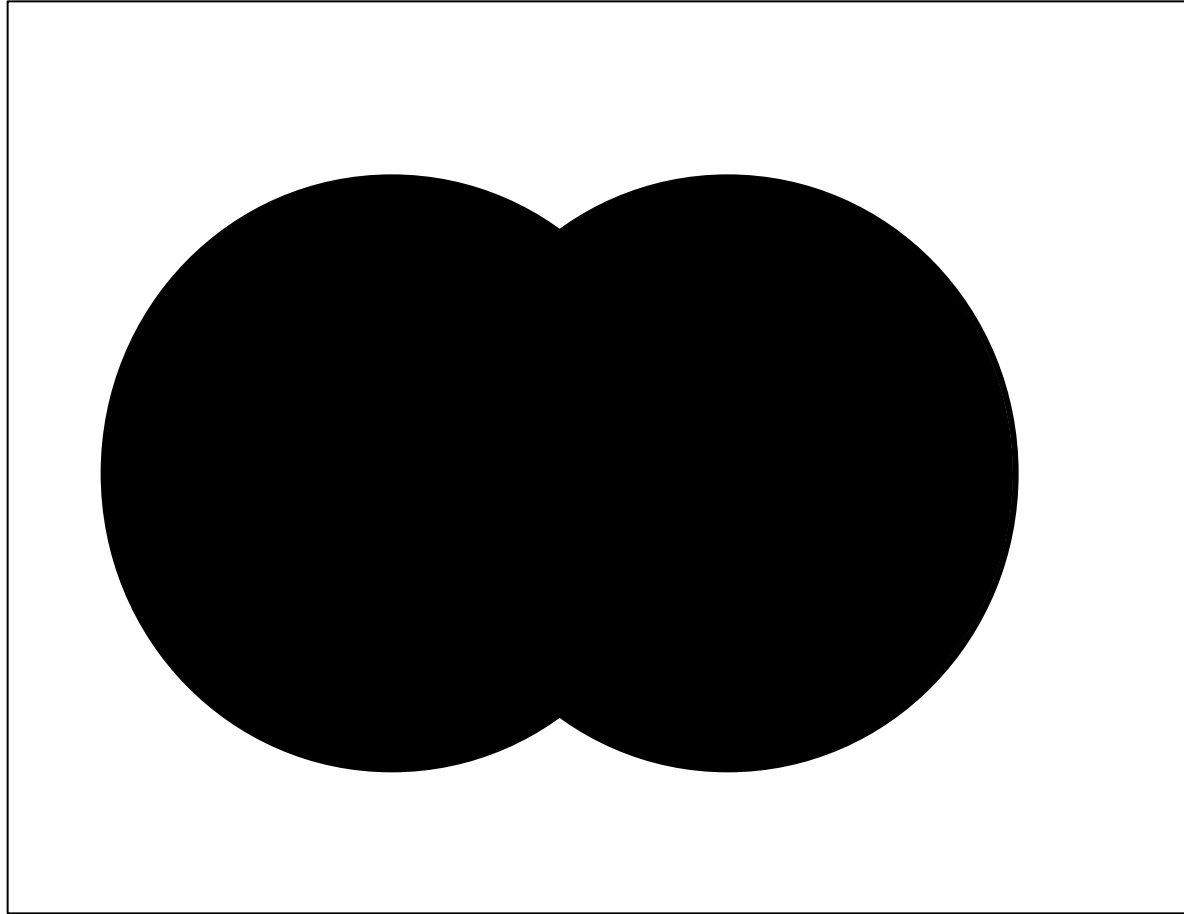
_____ Bill surfs for a hobby.

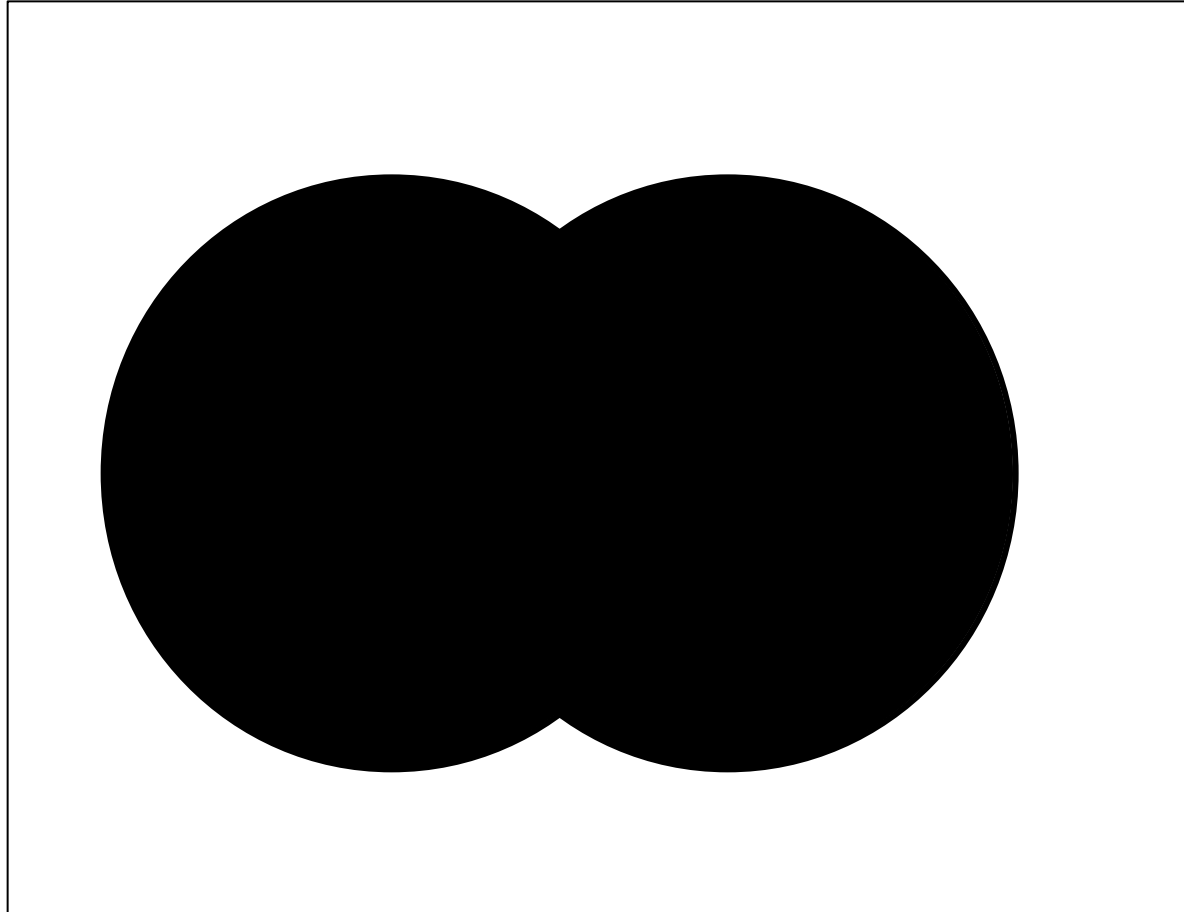
_____ Bill is a reporter.

_____ *Bill is an accountant who plays jazz for a hobby.*

_____ Bill climbs mountains for a hobby.

In most studies of the conjunction error, over 80% of people asked to provide judgments assign a higher probability to the conjunction than to one of the components.





Another way that the representativeness heuristic can lead us astray is through too much reliance on similarity and not enough attention to *base rates*.

You meet a person who is short, slim, and likes to read poetry. Is this person an Ivy League Classics professor or a truck driver?

Use of the representativeness heuristic would lead to the conclusion that the person is an Ivy League Classics professor. Careful consideration of base rate information would produce a different conclusion.

1. How many Ivy League universities are there? 8
 2. How many Classics Professors at each? 4
 3. How many of those Classics professors are short and slim? $1/2$
 4. How many of those short, slim, Classics professors like to read poetry? $1/2$
- How many Ivy League Classics professors fit the description? 8

1. How many truck drivers are there?
400,000

2. How many are short and slim? $1/8$

3. How many of those short, slim truck drivers like to read poetry? $1/10$

How many truck drivers fit the description?
5000

What are the odds that the person in the description is a truck driver? 625 to 1

2.) Availability Heuristic

A second type of decision that we often must make is “how often or how frequently does this event happen?”

The availability heuristic provides a shortcut based on the ease with which we can call instances to mind.

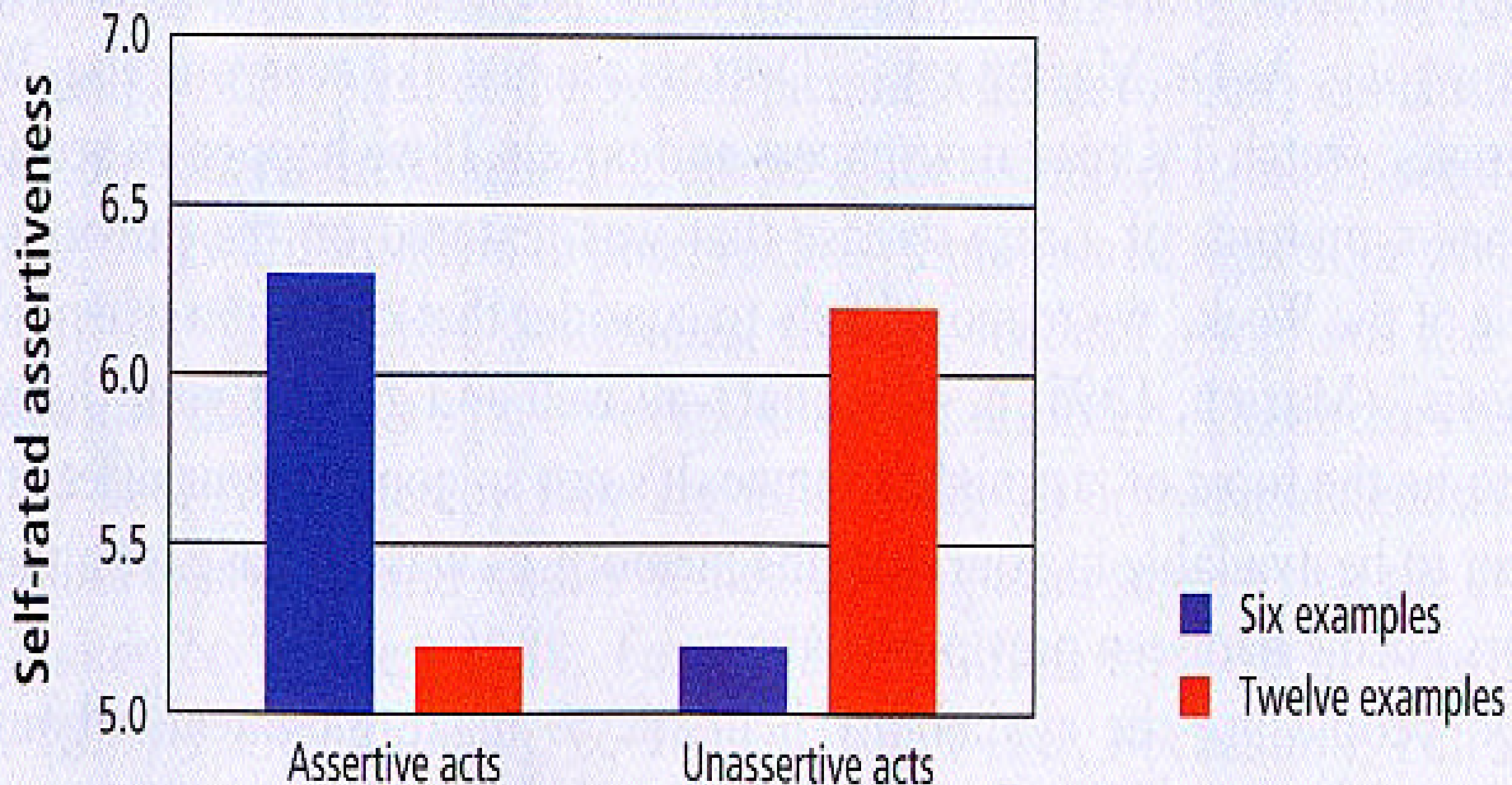
Information more easily called to mind is given greater weight.

Some examples of the availability heuristic in action:

- Does the “k” appear in print more often as the first or third letter? Do more people live in Cambodia or Tanzania?
- Overestimation of crime rates, especially violent crime.
- Errors in judging the likelihood of dying in a plane crash

Availability influences impressions of ourselves. Schwartz et al. (1991) asked participants to think of either 6 or 12 times when they behaved assertively or unassertively. Then they provided ratings of their assertiveness. It should be easier to call to mind 6 examples of behavior than 12 examples and that “availability” should affect ratings of assertiveness.

The ease with which the examples could be called to mind directed the ratings, regardless of the direction of the behavior.



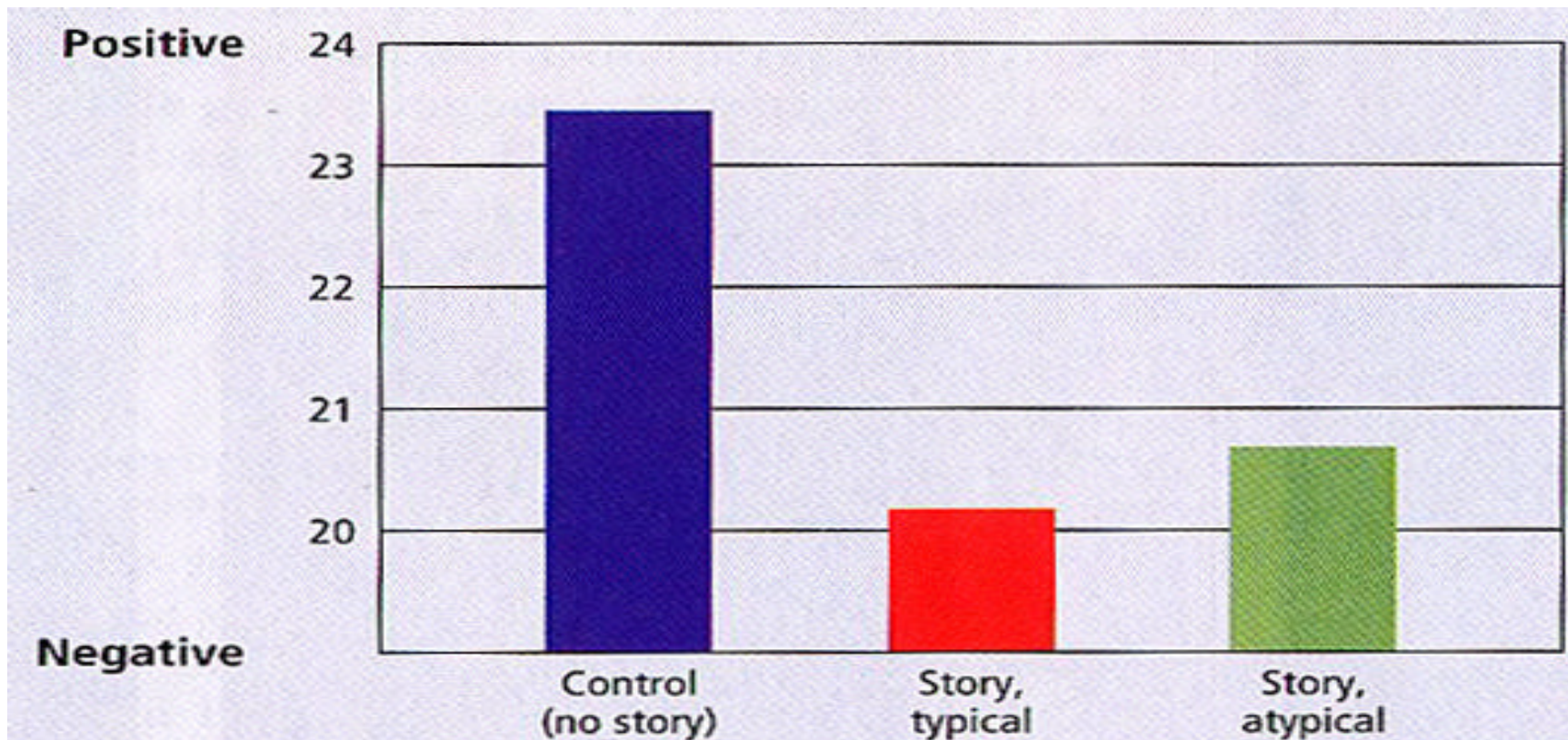
The Anchoring and Adjustment Heuristic

Related to availability, is the *anchoring and adjustment heuristic*. In many judgment situations (e.g., sentencing a defendant) we need to start with some beginning value and then adjust up or down given other information. The problem is that the starting point might be quite arbitrary and based on availability (e.g., I turned 45 today). We may not correct sufficiently from such biased values.

Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett (1980) had participants read a story about an unlikable welfare recipient. She was described as **irresponsible** and her life as bleak. Some participants were told this woman was typical of welfare recipients. Others were told she was atypical of welfare recipients.

Then participants rated their attitudes about all welfare recipients.

An unbiased decision maker should start with the story as an anchor (it is highly available) but then adjust given information about typicality. Most people do not adjust sufficiently . . .



3.) Regression toward the mean

Observed ability = true ability + chance

Whenever ability is influenced by chance, observations will over or underestimate one's true ability

In 1989, *Sports Illustrated* reported that of those baseball players who hit more than 20 home runs in the first half of the season, 90% hit fewer than 20 during the second half

The regression-toward-the-mean explanation is that their skills did not deteriorate, but rather that their unusually good performances during the first half exaggerated their skills

Table 1. How the Ten Players with the Highest batting averages in 1997
Did in 1996 and 1998

	1996	1997	1998
Larry Walker	.366	.363	.379
John Olerud	.294	.354	.298
Bernie Williams	.328	.339	.342
Mo Vaughn	.315	.337	.281
Eddie Perez	.215	.336	.249
Dante Bichette	.308	.331	.298
Albert Belle	.274	.328	.297
Mike Piazza	.362	.328	.303
Eric Davis	.304	.327	.257
Jason Kendall	.294	.327	.332
Average	.306	.337	.304

Part III: Managing Self-Image

Cognitive Strategies for Enhancing and Protecting the Self

Downward social comparison –
the process of comparing ourselves
with those who are less well off

Example: Breast cancer patients
compared themselves to those who
had more serious surgery

Cognitive Strategies for Enhancing and Protecting the Self

Upward social comparison –
the process of comparing ourselves
with those who are better off than
ourselves

Example: Comparing yourself to an
“A” student in order to inspire
yourself to study more.

Self-Serving Attributions

If you get a great grade on your next exam, why will that be?

Because you're smart?

Because you studied hard?

What if you get a lousy grade? Will that be because the exam was too hard? Because I'm a lousy teacher?

Self-serving Bias

Consider your own sense of humor.

Please rate your own sense of humor, compared to other people.

Rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 10.

1 = Much worse than other people's

10 = Much better than other people's

Research has shown that many people exhibit what has been called the "above average" effect. This term describes the tendency of most people to claim that they are above average on most positive traits. For example, most students believe that they are more intelligent than average and most people think they are better looking than average. In one sample of 829,000 high school students who took the SAT, 0% rated themselves as below average in "ability to get along with others," and 25% rated themselves as among the top 1%.

Research such as this has led psychologists to conclude that when people rate themselves in terms of socially desirable qualities or performance, they tend to see themselves as being better than average when they really are not. This tendency is often referred to as the *self-serving bias*. How often do you think you make this kind of mistake when judging or evaluating yourself? Circle the appropriate number:

Almost												Nearly all
Never	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9			the time

How often do you think the average person makes this kind of mistake when judging of evaluating herself or himself?

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Almost
Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Nearly all
the time

↑
Me

↑
Average
Person

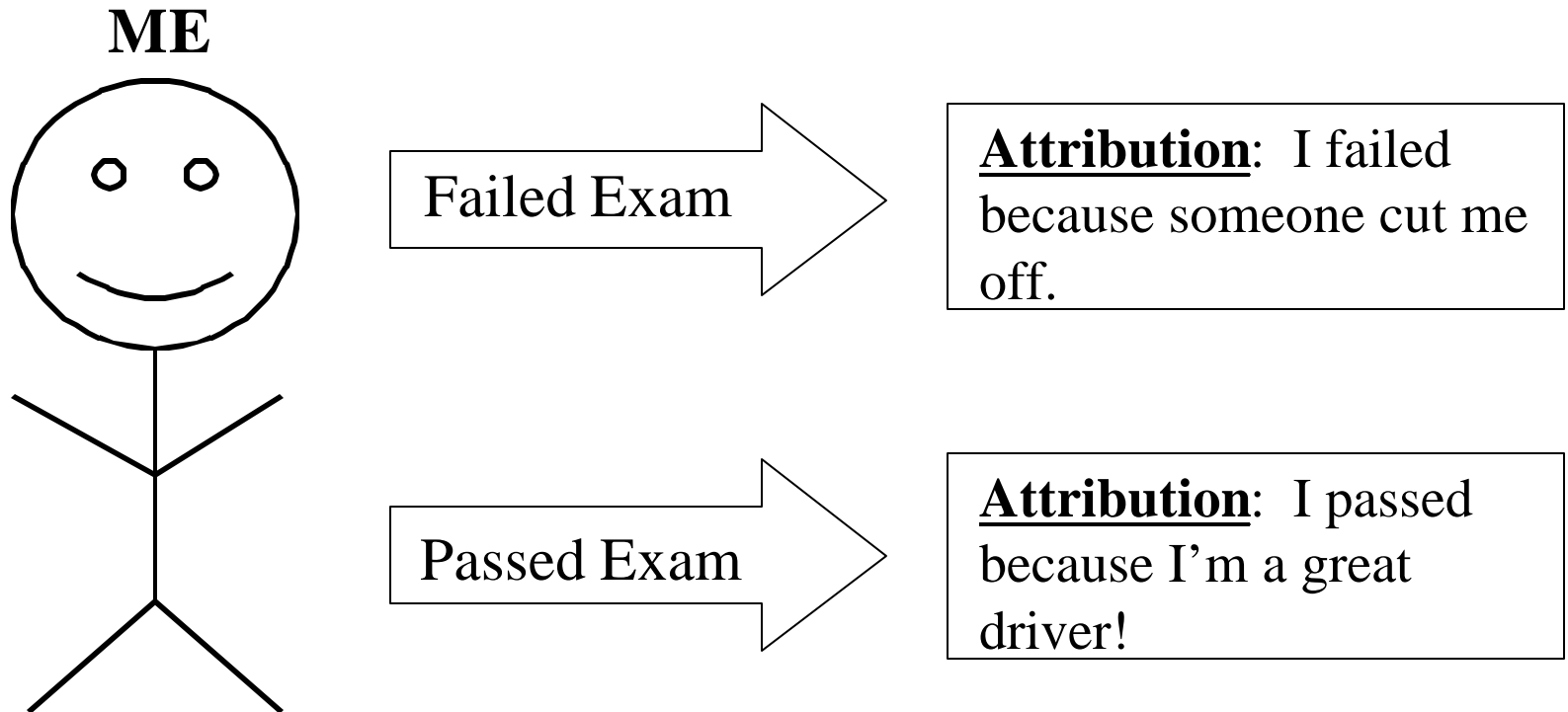
Self-serving Bias

Self-serving bias is the tendency to take more credit for success than is warranted, and to deny blame for failure more than is warranted.

Success is attributed to ability and effort, while failure is attributed to external factors such as bad luck.

Self-Serving Bias (our behavior)

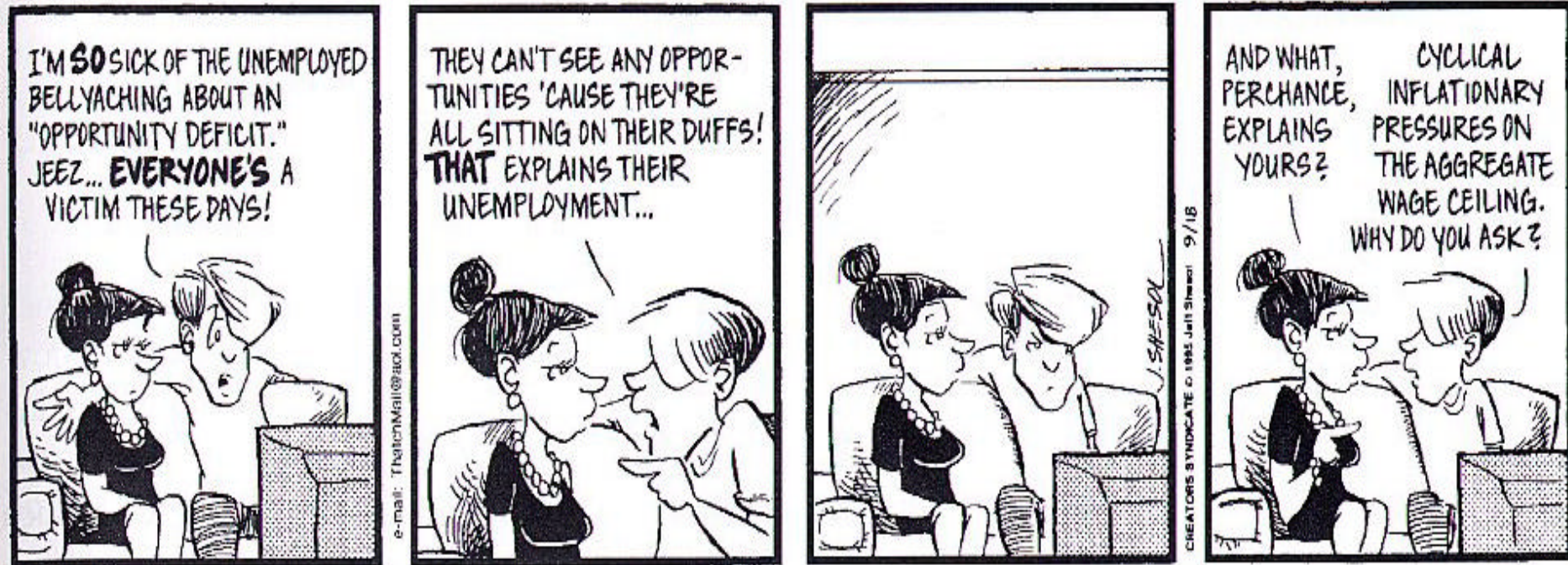
Example: I failed my driving exam. Why?
 I passed my driving exam. Why?



Self-serving bias is responsible for the positive illusions that most people have about their abilities and prospects.

One interesting example of the self-serving bias is the *above-average effect*.

THATCH by Jeff Shesol



Can we all be better than average?

Examples:

Many businesspeople see themselves as more ethical than their peers.

High school students rate their performance as superior to their average peer

Most drivers—even ones who crash—see themselves as better drivers than others!

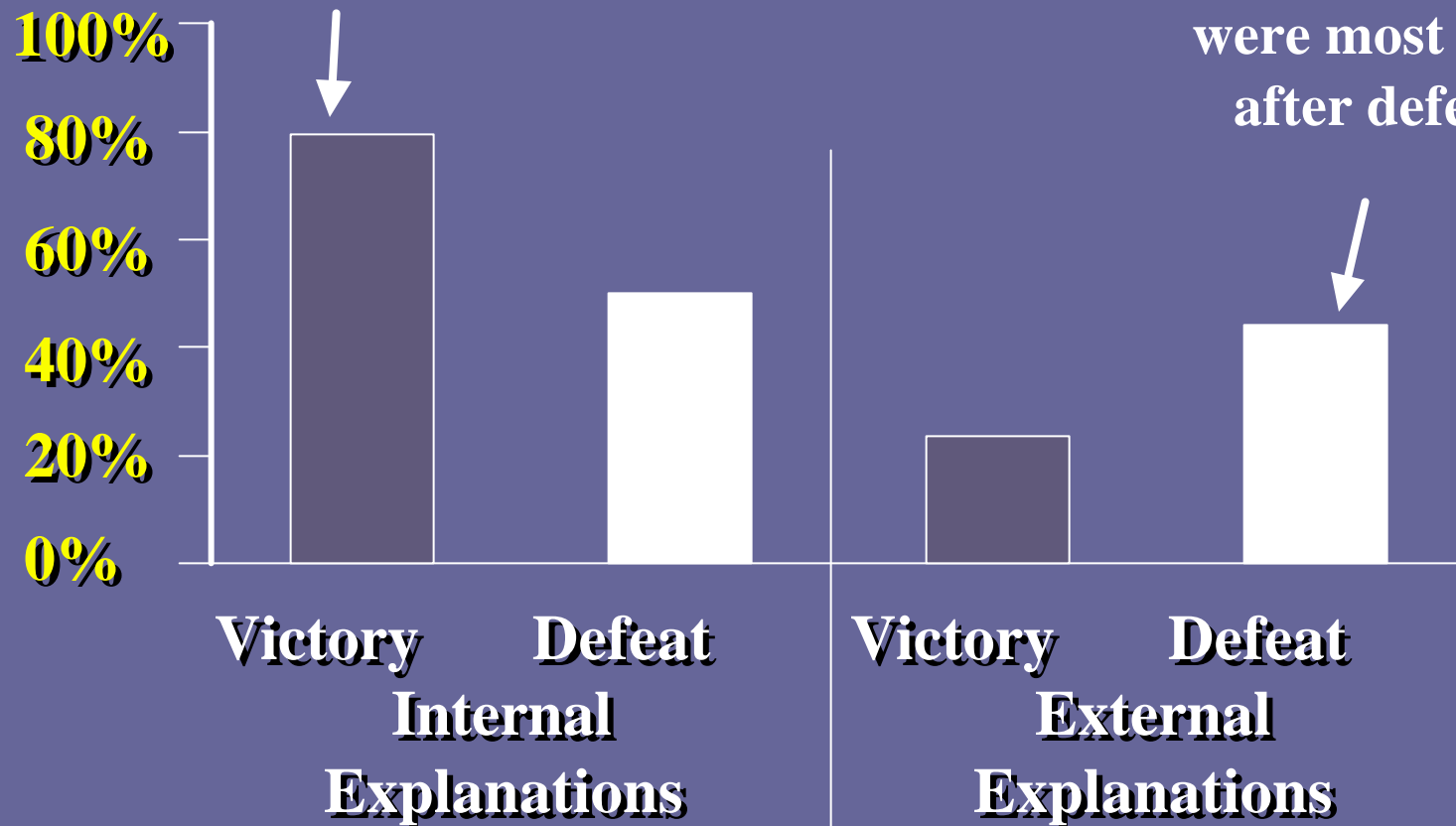
Self-Serving Bias

In a systematic analysis of newspaper articles describing 33 major baseball and football games in the fall of 1977, quotations from both players and coaches differed considerably depending on whether their teams won or lost.

Self-Serving Bias

Internal explanations were most likely after victories.

External explanations were most likely after defeats.



Lau and Russell (1980)

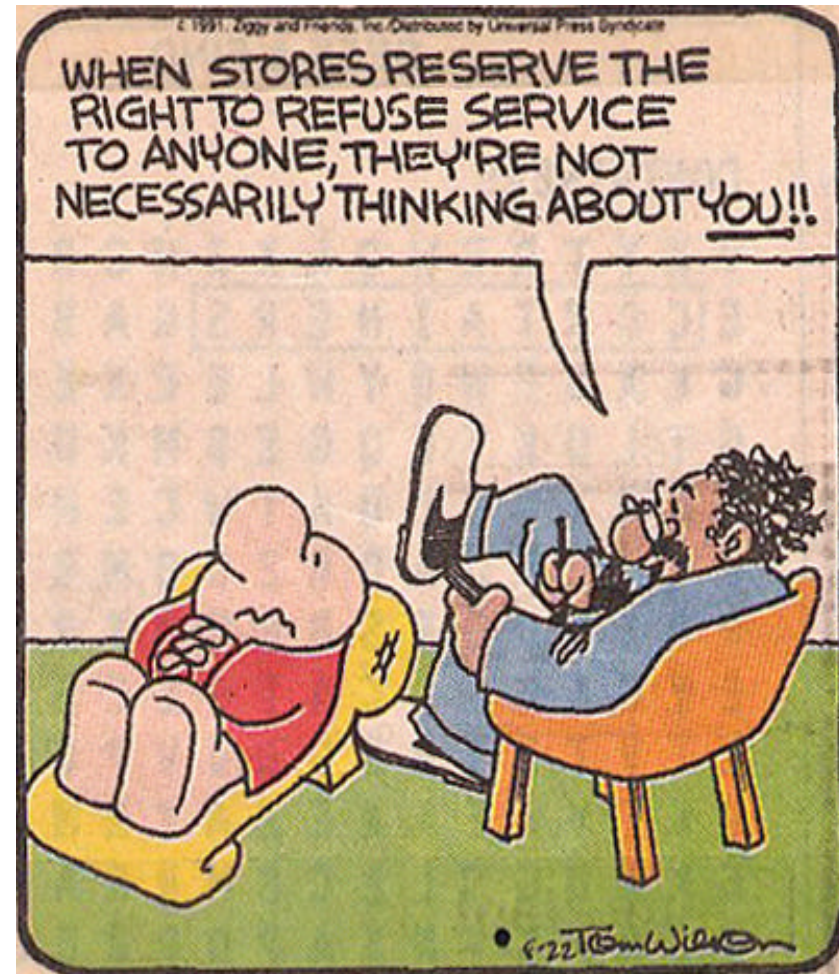
What explains Self-serving Bias?: **Cognitive Processes**

It could be that our cognition—how we process and remember information about ourselves—influence self-serving biases.

Example: I think that I cleaned the house more than my roommate because I remember my own actions more than I am able to remember his or her actions.

What explains Self-serving Bias?: **Self-esteem Protection**

The motivation to protect and enhance self-esteem has received the most empirical support in explaining self-serving bias.

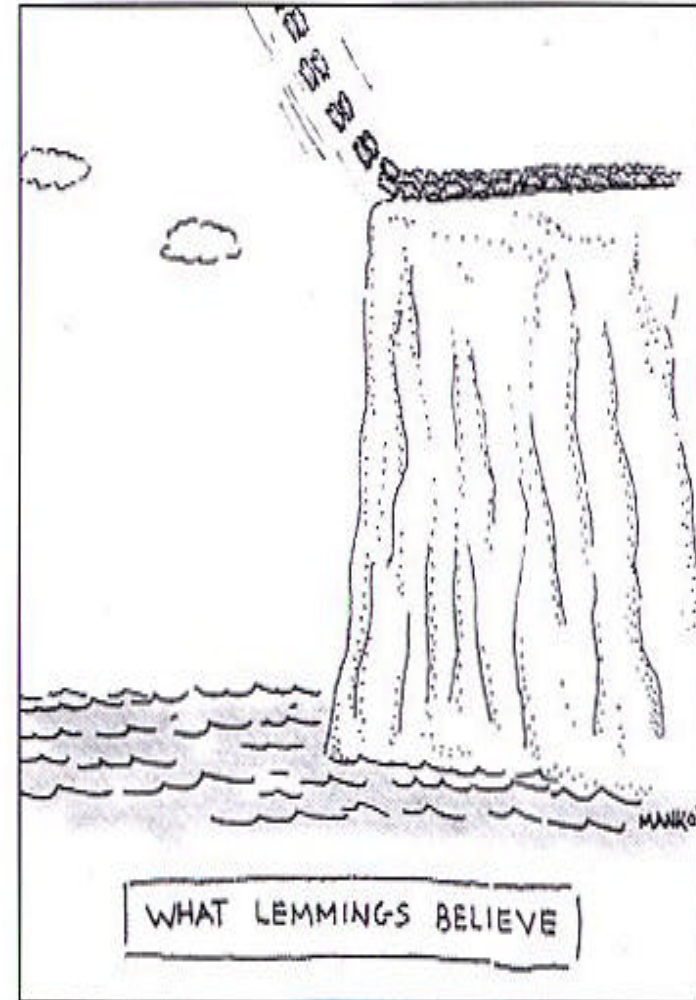


Self-esteem and Social Ostracism

Social rejection or ostracism can lower our self-esteem. Most people do not like to be socially rejected.

High self-esteem may buffer individuals from social rejection and failures.

(VIDEO: example of social ostracism).



Is Self-esteem Adaptive?

Self-serving bias and its accompanying excuses help protect people from depression. (People who “externalize” their problems often happier than people who “internalize” their problems).

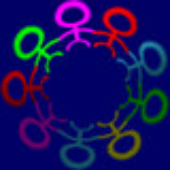
Self-serving bias may help us from thinking about what people really think about us.

Pascal: “I lay it down as a fact that, if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world.”

Is Self-esteem maladaptive?

Self-enhancing people often come across as egotistical, condescending, and deceitful.

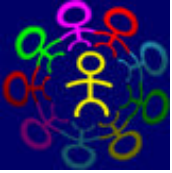
- 1.) People with high self-esteem found to be more aggressive when challenged.
- 2.) People with high self-esteem can make cooperation difficult and spoil groups.



Threats to Self Esteem

People rate standardized tests (like the SAT) as less valid when they perform poorly.

Mortality salience (thinking about death) causes people to derogate others who challenge their values.



How Universal is the Need for Positive Self-Regard?

Research contrasting Japanese with North Americans suggests that members of collectivistic cultures are less likely to demonstrate biases like the ones we've been exploring.