

Objectives of this project

This project includes research on human judgment. One of the basic and trivial truths derived from psychological research is that judgments drive human behavior – we act because we think certain thoughts, believe certain statements, and evaluate in certain ways. Therefore, to understand and predict human behavior we need to understand how people form judgments and act upon them.

Planned research

Out of many different forms of judgments we are specifically interested in those that do not require introspective access to memory content or perceptual input. They are studied under “intuitive” or “implicit” terms because of different property and functional characteristics than explicit or conscious judgments. The main difference between them is that forming intuitive, or implicit, judgments is fast, efficient, and does not engage conscious access to memory traces or even perceptual information. For example, when meeting a new individual we are relatively spontaneously, easily and automatically evaluate the person, and only later on are able to formulate specific thoughts about this person behavioral, or personality characteristic. This applies not only to social stimuli, but virtually all other stimulus we encounter. Among many others, there is one interesting case of intuitive judgments we would like to explore in this project – judgments of semantic coherence.

Judgments of semantic coherence refer to people ability to assess the semantic relations between different concepts. In their seminal work, Bower et al. (1990) were first to demonstrate that people can very accurately determine the semantic coherence of three presented words even though they cannot consciously access the basis of this coherence, i.e. a concept that links all of three. Those experiments involved showing participants three words (a triad) and asking them to judge whether they have a common associate (a solution), i.e. the word that is semantically related to all three words presented. The basic result was that even though only 1/5 of solutions were provided correctly, about 4/5 semantically coherent triads were accurately judged as having a solution.

Research justification

The specific aim of this project is to determine how different sources of fluency contribute to semantic coherence judgments. This aim will be realized in several lines of experimental studies. We plan to employ independent manipulations that selectively address perceptual and processing fluency. The main hypothesis is that both perceptual and semantic factors independently contribute to how people arrive in intuitive judgments of semantic coherence. Determining a relative contribution of those two sources of fluency will help to explain some inconsistencies in previous findings and feed our understanding of the mechanisms underlying human intuitive judgment. Hopefully, with this new knowledge we will also be more specific and accurate in our predictions concerning how people form spontaneous impressions of others, evaluate environment and themselves, and act upon those quickly formed judgments.