Accuracy and Bias in Person Perception

The present dissertation investigates how people make predictions about other people’s traits and feelings. In six experimental studies and one longitudinal study we investigate which strategies people use to predict others and whether the use of these strategies leads to biased and/or accurate predictions. We argue that bias and accuracy are two conceptually different constructs that both give valuable insights into the processes that guide person perception.

In the first empirical chapter we show that people’s predictions about others are based on different strategies for different targets. People rely on projection when predicting similar others and rely on stereotype information when predicting dissimilar others. Furthermore, the extent to which people rely on projection to predict similar others depends on the order in which predictions are made, with self-other predictions leading to less projection than other-self predictions. Predictions for dissimilar others are thus biased in the direction of the stereotype and predictions for similar others are biased in the direction of the self, but less so when other-predictions precede self-predictions. These findings give valuable insights into the processes that underlie person perception.

In the second empirical chapter we show that people use the same strategy to predict others’ emotional experiences that they use to predict their own emotional experiences. People tend to make biased predictions about their own future emotional experiences, and we show that people’s predictions about others’ future emotional experiences are similarly biased. In three experiments we show that this holds for friends as well as for strangers and when other sources of information are available. People’s predictions are nevertheless somewhat accurate because people are able to predict which emotions they will experience and to what extent. Furthermore, we show that the predictions of two people predicting
same person correspond to each other. This interpersonal accuracy can be very functional because it promotes understanding between people.

In the third empirical chapter we investigate the consequences of accurate person perception at the interpersonal level. We show that people have fairly accurate knowledge about their partner’s traits, preferences, and behaviors. Nevertheless, accurately knowing one’s partner is not related to relationship well-being; those who have very accurate partner knowledge are not more satisfied than those who have less accurate partner knowledge. However, we found that the feeling of understanding one’s partner and being understood by one’s partner is related to relationship satisfaction. It seems that accurate person perception does not influence people’s relationships. People’s own construction of how they perceive others and how others perceive them, however, is an important determinant of a happy relationship.

Together the seven studies presented in this dissertation show that people’s perceptions of others are both biased and accurate. People often base their predictions about others on heuristics, which leads to biased perceptions. Because we all use the same heuristics, however, chances are high that we nevertheless understand each other.