Experiencing the Perspective of the Other: Stanley Milgram's Cyranoid Method as a Means of Exploring Alternative Identities

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Abstract
Barriers to understanding and cooperation arise when we fail to take the perspective of the other people in our lives. But there are certain fundamental limits regarding the extent to which it is possible to take an alternative perspective or imagine someone else's first-person point-of-view. As much as we can empathize with others on the basis of shared experiences, we only ever directly experience ourselves, and resort to the powers of the imagination in order to place ourselves (metaphorically) in somebody else's shoes. Social psychologist Stanley Milgram, however, developed a clever means of accessing the first-person perspective of another social agent: the "cyranoid method." The technique entails constructing hybrid social agents ("cyranoids") composed of the "mind" (a.k.a. the "source") of one person and the "body" (a.k.a. the "shadower") of another. Via an audio-vocal procedure known as speech shadowing, sources control the verbal communication of shadowers while interacting face-to-face with other agents in various social environments. Cyranic contraptions allow people to experience the same social context through a variety of differentiated external identities to gain better understanding as to the relationship between identity and social behavior. I argue in the following paper that the cyranoid technique is particularly powerful as an experiential learning tool that enables research participants to creatively explore the first-person perspective of persons whose external identities differ from their own.

Keywords: Cyranoid, Milgram, person perception, embodiment, experimental methodology, perspective-taking

Introduction

In the late 1970s, American psychologist Stanley Milgram - who had risen to prominence in the decade prior for his controversial but impactful research on obedience to authority (Milgram, 1963, 1974) - began piloting an experimental procedure that enabled separate social actors the ability to function as a single interactive unit: a "cyranoid." Employing a vocal technique known as speech shadowing (see Marslen-Wilson, 1973; Schwitzgebel & Taylor, 1980), he trained research confederates to replicate the spontaneous prose produced by remote third-parties using covert audio-relay while in dialogue with naïve interlocutors (essentially, a "bug-in-the-ear" technique; see Gordon, 1975). The impetus for exploring such a transformed type of social interaction was inspired by the fictional account of the character Cyrano from Edmund Rostand's 19th century play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (trans, 1981). In the play, Cyrano, a poetic but unattractive romantic, provides prose to the physically handsome but linguistically dull Christian, who in turn speaks Cyrano's words to the object of their joint affection: the beautiful Roxane. Roxane subsequently falls in love with the mind of Cyrano and the body of Christian. Milgram's view was that these and other mind-body fusion fantasies illuminated the nature of the social self and the intimate relationship between physical appearance and person perception.

Milgram never formally reported any of his work with cyranoids. The most substantive published evidence of his applications of the cyranoid method appears in the form of a transcribed speech he prepared for an American Psychological Association (APA) conference shortly before his death in 1984 (Milgram, 2010). In the speech he describes two studies: one in which he explored adult-adult cyranoid pairs, and another in which he tested the possibility of incongruent cyranoid hybrids, pairing 11- and 12-year-old speech shadowers with words generated by an adult (Milgram) during dialogue with panels of teachers naïve to the deception. In both experiments, subjects who communicated with a cyranoid failed to detect that their conversation partner was simply repeating words emanating from a separate, unseen person. Milgram subsequently referred to this phenomenon as the "cyranic illusion," describing it as a person's persistent willingness to ascribe communicative autonomy to individuals even in circumstances involving apparent discrepancies between the dispositional elements of an interlocutor (i.e., their inner character as suggested by the words they produce) and their physical nature (e.g., age, gender, appearance, etc.).

The technique

Speech shadowing in one's native language is relatively simple. In a basic shadowing exercise, one person, the "shadower," wears an inner-ear device that receives communication from a "source." A source can be a spontaneously speaking third-party, an audio recording, or any other conceivable generator of linguistic communication (e.g., a computer program designed to generate human-like speech). As the shadower hears the source's communication, he or she attempts to repeat the message verbatim. Skilled speech shadowers can achieve latencies as low as several hundred milliseconds (Marslen-Wilson, 1985), and shadowers tend to mimic the gestural idiosyncrasies of their source (Pardo, Jordan, Mallari, Scanlon, & Lewandowski, 2013), capacities that contribute to the illusion that a speech shadower is self-generating the words they produce. Combining a source with a separate

shadower creates a hybrid agent of sorts: the "mind" of one person fused with the "body" of another. A cyranoid.

Creating a mobile, covert cyranoid capable of socially interacting with others requires utilizing a basic amalgam of simple gadgetry (detailed overviews of which can be found in Corti & Gillespie, 2014; as well as in Mitchell, Gillespie, & O'Neill, 2011). In a basic apparatus, the shadower wears a discreet wireless inner-ear radio receiver that picks up audio from a signal transmitted by the source. This can be facilitated using a microphone connected to a FM transmitter. Such a contraption allows the cyranoid the ability to freely maneuver among "interactants" (Milgram's term for research subjects who engage with a cyranoid) without compromising the experimental deception. Audio as well as video of the shadower's field of vision can be transmitted to the source via either hidden or overt recording devices. In this manner, a source can observe and listen to interactant communication and reply via the shadower in real-time.

The utility of such a method: Exploring alternative identities

Sourcing for a shadower approximates "stepping into the shoes" of another person, allowing one to experience social interactions as though one had the body of a different human being. The methodology runs parallel to analogous first-person means of assuming an alternate physical social persona such as the online digital platform Second Life, wherein users may control customized avatars and gain a sense of how intersubjectivity unfolds in relation to certain characteristics of one's outer appearance (see Boellstorff 2008; Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009). Immersive virtual environment technologies have also been employed by researchers to further understand the relationship between transformed outer identity, self-perception, and social behavior (see "the Proteus effect": Yee & Bailenson, 2007). The key features of these technologies are that they allow for interactive research wherein subjects may manoeuvre within a particular social environment relatively unconstrained, as well as allow for levels of mundane realism well beyond those achieved by more traditional means of social psychological experimentation that demonstrate behavioral confirmation and related phenomena by use of static experimental stimuli (e.g., "paper people": see Murphy, Herr, Lockhart, & Maguire, 1986; for a discussion of these methods in relation to mundane realism, see Blascovich et al., 2002). The cyranoid technique brings these concepts of hybridity and transformed social identity into the realm of actual (i.e., non-virtual) human-human interactions. Cyranoid-interactant interactions are face-to-face encounters involving real human beings as stimuli, and in that sense come much closer to simulating the realism of real-world social encounters.

Corti and Gillespie (2014) provide a replication of the unpublished cyranoid studies Milgram describes in his 1984 APA speech. Their first study explored whether research subjects would detect when a male confederate was speech shadowing for a female source during face-to-face interlocution (relative to a control condition in which the male confederate spoke autonomously), and their second study explored Milgram's interview scenario wherein an adult confederate and a child confederate alternated sourcing and shadowing for one another during discussions with panels of research participants (naïve to the deception) tasked with assessing their intellectual capabilities. Even in this later scenario, wherein the component identities of the

cyranoid were vastly incongruent with one another, interactants still made sense of their interlocutor as though they were an autonomously communicating individual. This allowed the researchers to gauge to what extent the physical persona of the cyranoid shaped the nature of the research subjects' contributions to the dialogue as well as how the source's behavior changed in relation to the outer identity they communicated through. The findings of these studies point to a number of applications of the method spanning a variety of behavioral science domains.

Thus, the cyranoid method has vast potential as a first-person tool for studying social perception and related behavioral confirmation phenomena. For instance, we can imagine having a controlled source author words for a variety of physically-distinct shadowers across experimental conditions encompassing a certain social scenario while observing how the behavior and attributions of interactants change in relation to their stereotyped assumptions of the cyranoid they encounter. In this manner a single individual (the source) could experience a "landscape" of possible identities within the same social frame, gaining a sense of how their social world responds differently on the basis of the physical persona they embody. For example, Choi (2012) used the method to directly experience corporate interviews through the bodies of male and female candidates, while Corti (2012) used age-differentiated shadowers to experience social persuasion scenarios.

Cyranoids may also be used as a means of exploring alternative identities in the classroom. In a study undertaken by Mitchell (2010), teachers sourced for adolescent speech shadowers during classroom learning exercises, affording students the ability to participate in instructing their peers on new course material. Mitchell suggests that such applications of the cyranoid method may serve to scaffold children's presentation and social skills, as well as enliven the classroom environment through engaging students in the act of teaching.

Conclusion

For the researcher interested in how physical identity and social perception impact behavior, the cyranoid method affords the opportunity to study these and related phenomena in a highly dynamic and interactive way. The method is particularly apt for exploring firsthand the nature of physical identity and its role in eliciting the social world one encounters. It is indeed a worthy and long overdue addition to the social psychologist's repertoire of approaches to understanding person perception and the nature of the social self.

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