Impression Formation
Social Psychology
Dr Claire Lawrence

Impression formation
• How do we form judgements and impressions of people?
• Are some types of information more important than others?
• What are the approaches to the study of impression formation?

Forming impressions
Consider the following group descriptions of a person:
INTELLIGENT
SKILLFUL
INDUSTRIOUS
WARM
DETERMINED
PRACTICAL
CAUTIOUS
Now give the person a rating out of 10 (where 10 means you have formed a very positive impression of the person)

Forming impressions
Consider the following group descriptions of a person:
INTELLIGENT
SKILLFUL
INDUSTRIOUS
COLD
DETERMINED
PRACTICAL
CAUTIOUS
Now give the person a rating out of 10 (where 10 means you have formed a very positive impression of the person)

Asch’s paradigm
• Those who saw the first group of adjectives usually form a more positive impression of the person.
• Asch’s (1946) explanation was that we form impressions using some kind of gestalt or ‘whole picture’, with each piece of information influencing the others.
• an intelligent & warm person generates a positive impression
• an intelligent & cold person generates a negative impression

Asch’s configural model
• This approach is known as the configural model
• The cold and warm traits have a strong effect on the interpretation of the surrounding traits
• These are termed CENTRAL traits because of their influence
• Other traits do not have the same power: polite / blunt
• Traits which appear first have more impact in final impression (primacy effect)
**Anderson’s alternative**

- Asch’s results could be explained differently.
- Judgements could be simply combined in value (Anderson, 1974, 1981) in the algebraic model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Impression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>+++v</td>
<td>Moderately positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent + cold</td>
<td>+ve plus ___v</td>
<td>Moderately negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent + warm</td>
<td>+ve plus +++v</td>
<td>Very positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Problems with Asch & Anderson**

- Data supporting one theory can be used to support the other.
- Neither theories take into account the motives, goals and needs of the perceiver.
- Social cognition as EITHER theory driven (Asch) or data driven (Anderson) is limiting.
- Studies tend to be artificial.
- Likelihood that both influences occur (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995).

**Fiske & Neuberg (1990)**

Assumptions:
- Perceivers prioritize category-based processes.
- Perceivers are active.
- Piecemeal-based impressions take much longer.
- Category-based impressions are more cognitively efficient.
- Once a perceiver has begun to categorize, piecemeal impressions become less likely.

**Continuum Model of Impression Formation**

Fiske & Neuberg (1990)

- **Initial Categorization**
  - Category label only, no data.
  - Easily categorizable data

- **Confirmatory Categorization**
  - Label + consistent data
  - Label + mixed data
  - Strong label + irrelevant data

- **Recategorization**
  - Weak label + irrelevant data
  - Label + inconsistent data

- **Piecemeal Integration**
  - Uncategorizable data only

**Memory and impression formation**

Social cognition approaches maintain that existing categories direct:
- the attention to new data,
- the way the data is interpreted,
- And the way the data is remembered.

- Is information better remembered under impression formation instructions or memorize instructions?
Memory and impression formation

Hamilton et al (1980):
Subjects asked to either:
• Memorize a list of traits, or
• Form impression of an individual based on same traits

Later given a surprise recall test

Impression formation subjects remembered significantly more items than memory task subjects

I.F. and self fulfilling prophesy

Darley & Gross (1983)

Two stages in expectancy-confirmation process
• If unsure of valid judgement based on category - proceed with caution
• When behaviour is observed - adapt (or even generate) the evidence to fit their initial category-based judgement.

I.F. and self fulfilling prophesy

Darley & Gross (1983)

• Subjects shown video & info about Hannah
  manipulated Socio-economic status (SES)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High SES</th>
<th>Low SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No additional video shown</td>
<td>No judgement made</td>
<td>No judgement made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional video shown of ambiguous behaviour</td>
<td>Judgements made were positive</td>
<td>Judgements made were negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

• Impression formation is neither simply top-down or bottom up
• Contemporary work shows individuals are more dynamic in their use of data
• Impression formation has influence on memory
• Impression formation has implications for the self fulfilling prophecy
• Is there a link to stereotyping?