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IS SELF-PERCEPTION PREDICTABLE? - SOME LABORATORY RESULTS -

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ABSTRACT

People work hard at trying to find out who they are and the task seems forever incomplete. Yet, some characteristics appear frequently enough within our culture to have a degree of predictability. The short survey which forms the basis for this paper was administered to a large number of undergraduate management students (c55) over a long period of time (January 1970 to January 1979). When comparing the profile for the nine-year period to one for a shorter time period, the stability of results is striking. Means and standard deviations for each survey item have been developed, and thus, others can use the same survey to discover the predictability of their own samples.

INTRODUCTION

The advice to "Know Thyself" has been in existence for a long time, and yet most findings reveal that most of us are rather poor self-evaluators. The fundamental problem appears to be based on the idea that, in self-evaluation, we are dealing with the most significant image in our lives -- ourselves. People have always struggled to make sense out of their environment - to practice "cosmology" as cited by the late Douglas McGregor. This writer suggests that our environment molds our self-perception very strongly, and further, that we are part of our own environment via the psychological screening we apply to our perceptions of reality.

A behavioral laboratory is a way to deal with a major problem in studying the behavioral sciences effectively; It provides an effective counterpart to the natural science laboratory. It is apparent that any laboratory experience is not reality, instead it is an approximation -- a simulation in a relatively short time frame. Even so, participants do respond, emotions do get involved, and real decisions and debates occur.

AN EXERCISE IN SELF-PERCEPTION

The author has used a 15-item questionnaire for varying sizes of undergraduate classes containing junior and senior students. The medium age of these students is approximately 23, and the sample has included an increasing number of females in the last two years.

This exercise draws much of its information from the monograph Can An Adult Change? by Robert L. Sutherland, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, The University of Texas, Austin. The activities involve a reading which includes fifteen basic issues related to perception of oneself, environmental change, and the need to grow and function effectively. An interesting observation over the past three years is that it does not seem to make any appreciable difference whether or not students have heard a lecture or read the reading prior to completing the questionnaire. In fact, it is better, methodologically, to have the participants fill out the questionnaires prior to reading or discussing any of the fifteen basic issues.

In an oversimplified form, the fifteen issues are these: (1) Resisting change, (2) Systematizing everything, (3) Being an "unorganizer," (4) Resenting evaluation, (5) Dreaming -- and more dreaming, (6) Damning things --and sometimes people, (7) Worrying -- for the fun of it, (8) Sarcasm -- for the "sting" of it, (9) Nagging, (10) Procrastinating, (11) Making quick decisions, (12) Running for shelter (avoidance of subordinate's problems), (13) Making frankness a fetish, (14) Wearing feelings on the proverbial "sleeve," (15) Clinging to well-earned status.

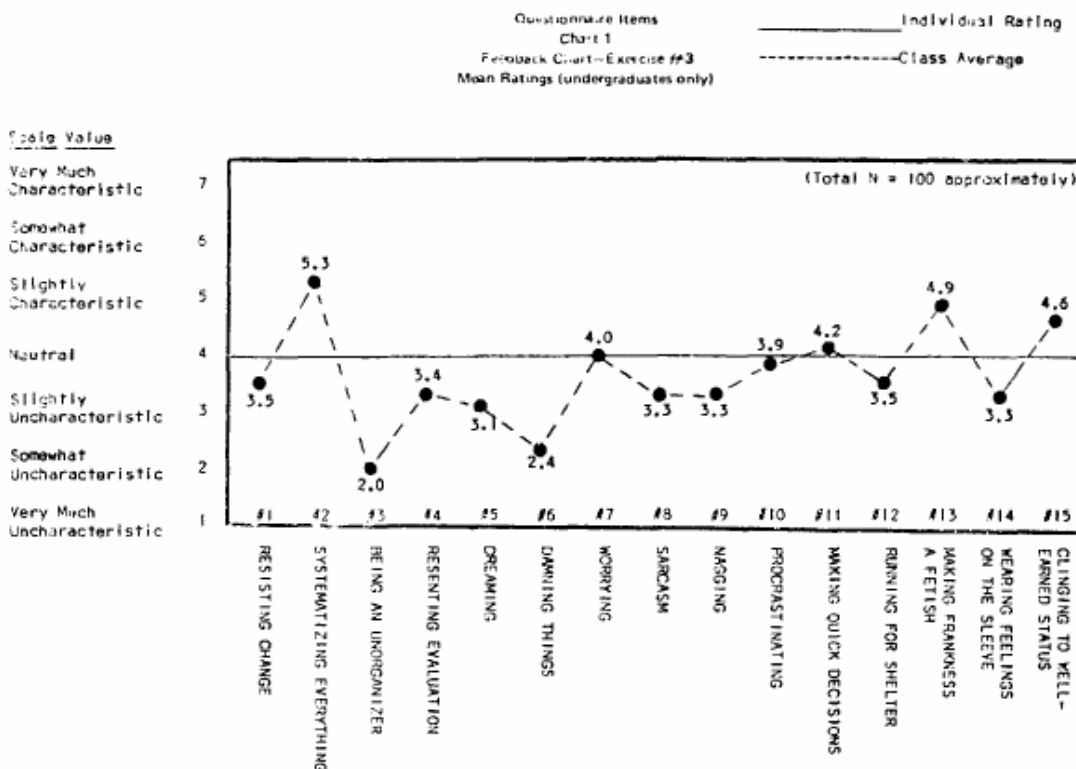
After the participants complete the questionnaire, they are asked to record their numerical response to each of the fifteen items on another form provided for this purpose. These forms are given (unsigned) to the instructor. An assistant computes an average rating (either a median or mean can be used) for the class as a whole. Then, using these average values, the instructor provides feedback to the class which has been plotting their individual profiles on the feedback chart which is contained in their laboratory manual. Each participant then has a graphic comparison of his own self-profile and the profile of his class average. The class is, of necessity, small, with enrollment controlled to produce a class size of 18 to 24 students.

It is helpful both for plotting and evaluation purposes to draw a midpoint line across the chart at a scale value of four. The chart on the following page shows the format of this feedback, and also shows a class profile based on accumulated undergraduate responses (N = 100 approx.).

The general pattern shown on Chart 1 is typical of class average profiles generated over the last five years. There is not dependable difference between classes around 16 students or 22 to 24 students in size. Likewise, no noticeable difference occurs when considering when the class meets -- morning, afternoon, or at night. However, there does seem to be an appreciable difference when comparing Master's students with undergraduates. Master's students tend to produce a profile (class mean) which is generally more positive (values larger than four. Perhaps higher ages and greater experience tend to make the graduate student even more cautious than the undergraduate student.

A complete copy of the exercise questionnaire is included in the Appendix. Some comment about the rationale behind the creation of the wording for the items contain thoughts which seem in opposition to each other. For example, item 13, "I consider myself an honest person. I am often quite frank even if the truth is painful to others." The first part of the statement appears positive and flattering. The second part is not flattering. Our cultural norm seems to applaud honesty, but not to the point of being cruelly frank (inflicting mental pain on others.) Thus, a dilemma is posed for the respondent, and most respondents readily say they felt ambivalent when answering the survey. The intention behind the item design is to present a multi-faceted idea in an attempt to simulate the grey or fuzzy areas in which we, as adults, make most of our significant decisions.

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Are groups of participants producing similar or predictable response patterns over a period of time? Chart 1 shows the pattern of an accumulated N size of 100 during the period January 1970 to June 1973.

These data represent class average responses rather than individual profiles. The respondents have, of course, two profiles on their charts; one similar to that shown in Chart 1 and their own individual response pattern. The issue then centers on comparison/contrast of these two curves. Interest is drawn to those points which are farthest apart and especially to those items where the profile segments are going in the opposite directions.

Where marked contrasts appear, the issue of which (or what) is "normal" arises. Increasingly, this term is losing its value as an acceptable definition. It appears that what is "normal" is expanding steadily in our culture and, therefore, the term is losing its usefulness. The discussion of differences between group and individual profiles is more productive when approached in terms of whether the behavior is functional or not, whether it produces the desired results and skill is acceptable to significant others in that situation. Therefore, the test of whether behavior is alright or not becomes quite programmatic.

STABILITY OF THE SELF-PERCEPTION PROFILE

One may, and should, ask the question: How does the profile

hold up in a longer time frame? Implied by this question are sub-set questions such as; What impact do changes in the economy have? Are there appreciable shifts in cultural norms? Changes in subculture norms (business students)?

An attempt was made to answer the main question by analyzing profile data for the period January 1970 to January 1979. This accumulation yielded a total group of 455 students, again all at the undergraduate level. Chart 2 displays this longer time frame profile.

A comparison of the profiles shown on chart 1 and Chart 2 reveals a remarkable stability for the responds. While it is true that the first group of 100 is included in the total. 455, it is composed of less than 25% of the larger population. Thus, the earlier group does not have major impact on the profile of the total group.

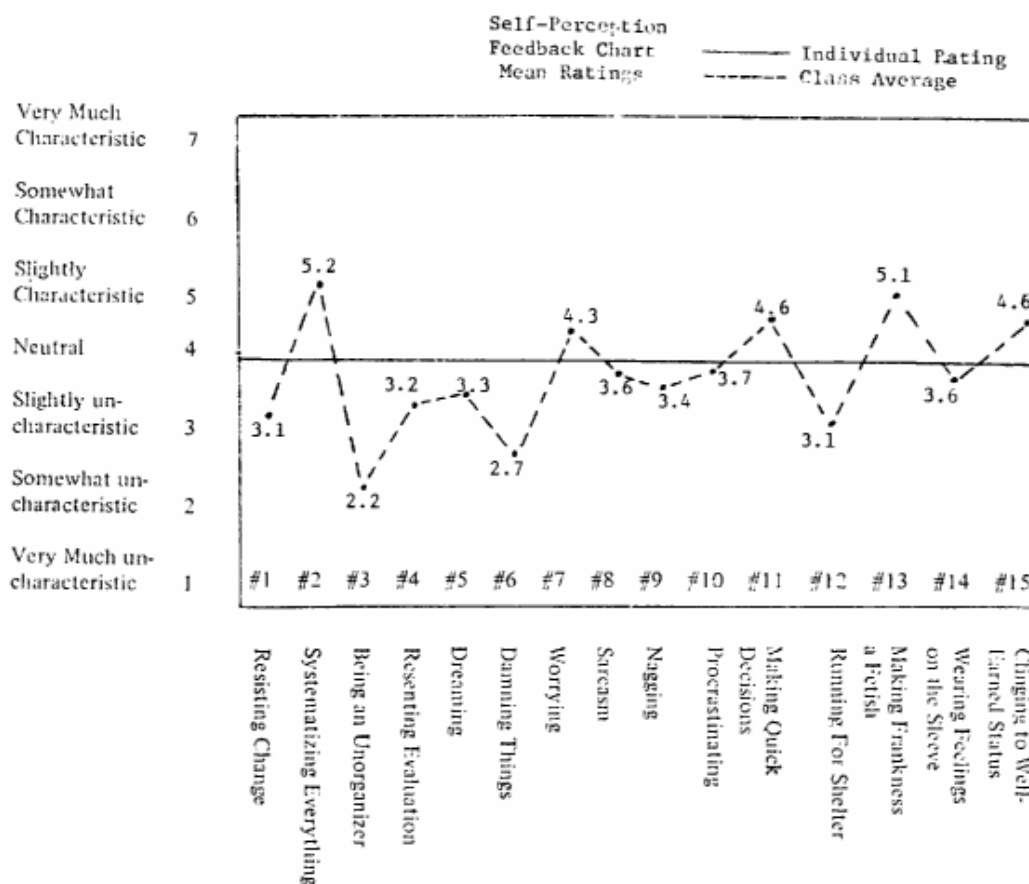
For purposes of probability predictions for use by others interested in developing their own profile, the Appendix also contains universe means and standard deviations for each of the 15 items. Thus, distribution curve can be created for each of these items for prediction and comparison purposes.

Hopefully, others will use the exercise and thus be able to put the predictive value of this profile and distribution curve to their own test. Indeed, this writer would predict that your participants will fall within ± 3 standard deviations of the mean shown on Chart 2 and developed further in the appendix. Please consider that prediction as a challenge.

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APPENDIX

CHART 2



Self-Perception Rating Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: Each paragraph below gives a description of personal characteristics which might or might not be true of you. For each statement try to determine the degree to which the statement is typical of you. Try to be as objective as you can. Rate each statement according to the following scale:

- 7 - The statement is very much characteristic of me.
- 6 - The statement is somewhat characteristic of me.
- 5 - The statement is slightly characteristic of me.
- 4 - The statement is neither characteristic or uncharacteristic of me.
- 3 - The statement is slightly uncharacteristic of me.
- 2 - The statement is somewhat uncharacteristic of me.
- 1 - The statement is very much uncharacteristic of me.

- ___1. I resent suggestions, hold to my present ways and tend to resist pressures to change.
- ___2. I am orderly, and tend to systematize things and people.
- ___3. I am disorganized, and live in a state of "clutter".
- ___4. I do each days work well but resist and resent evaluation. I am inclined to get involved in busy work and avoid tasks which call for a lot of future planning and preparation.

- ___5. I tend to do a lot of dreaming, and have been sometimes referred to as an "idea" man but accused of having lost a sense of proportion or perspective.
- ___6. I spend much of my time and energy in criticizing political parties, school, work, other people and so on.
- ___7. I am a "worrier". Often I worry about things that have not happened or about things that are already over.
- ___8. I am sarcastic, sometimes towards others in my presence and sometimes toward others who are not present.
- ___9. I am likely to "nag" if things aren't going well.
- ___10. I am a procrastinator, putting off decisions until I have sought out and questioned others; often it is then too late to take the best action.
- ___11. I am what people could call "decisive". I am efficient, size things up quickly and act so as to get results right away.
- ___12. I avoid becoming entangled in other people's emotional problems and usually find some excuse to get away from people who are about to "unload" on me.
- ___13. I consider myself an honest person. I am often quite frank even if the truth is painful to others.

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___14. I am quite sensitive and often take things said very personally. I am likely to "fly off the handle" with little provocation.

3.27 ± .64 = 95%
3.27 ± .96 = 99.7%

___15. I find it very difficult to "step down in responsibility" to make room for others. Once I have gained a position with status I find it difficult to give it up.

6. Being Critical

U = 2.66 std. dev. = .41
Thus: 2.66 ± .41 = 68%
2.66 ± .82 = 95%
2.66 ± 1.23 = 99.7%

STATISTICAL DATA FOR SELF-PERCEPTION PROFILE SURVEY

This analysis is based on 25 separate response sheets of undergraduate classes at the senior level with section sizes ranging from 13 to 34. Both day and night sections were included for the period January 1970 to January 1979.

Sample means were calculated for each of the 15 items on the survey and the standard deviations were also calculated for each item. With the general assumption that participants' responses are approximating a normal distribution a curve for each item can be created. It should be noted that the actual shapes of these distribution curves differ since the response patterns to the items themselves differ.

Probability statistics for dispersion from the mean (either \bar{X} or U) are as follows:

Range	Percentage of Data Variation Accounted For
U ± .67 std. dev.	59%
U ± 1 std. dev.	68%
U ± 2 std. dev.	95%
U ± std. dev.	99.7%

The possible range of responses for the Self-Perception questionnaire was 7 (very characteristic) to 1 (very uncharacteristic) with 4 being a neutral or "not applicable" response.

The Individual Items

1. Resisting Change

U = 3.11 std. dev. = .46
Thus: 3.11 ± .46 = 68%
3.11 ± .92 = 95%
3.11 ± 1.38 = 99.7%

2. Systematizing Things

U = 5.25 std. dev. = 3.68
Thus: 5.25 ± .368 = 68%
5.25 ± .736 = 95%
5.25 ± 1.1 = 99.7%

3. Being an Unorganizer

U = 2.2 std. dev. = 4.26
Thus: 2.2 ± .426 = 68%
2.2 ± .852 = 95%
2.2 ± 1.28 = 99.7%

4. Resisting Evaluation

U 3.22 std. dev. = .422
Thus: 3.22 ± .422 = 68%
3.22 ± .844 = 95%
3.22 ± 1.27 = 99.7%

5. Daydreaming

U = 3.27 std. dev. = .318
Thus: 3.27 ± .318 = 68%

7. Worrying

U = 4.27 std. dev. = .53
Thus: 4.27 ± .53 = 68%
4.27 ± 1.06 = 95%
4.27 ± 1.59 = 99.7%

8. Being Sarcastic

U = 3.61 std. dev. = .42
Thus: 3.61 ± .42 = 68%
3.61 ± .84 = 95%
3.61 ± 1.26 = 99.7%

9. Nagging

U = 3.43 std. dev. = .53
Thus: 3.43 ± .53 = 68%
3.43 ± 1.06 = 95%
3.43 ± 1.59 = 99.7%

10. Procrastination

U = 3.72 std. dev. = .55
Thus: 3.72 ± .55 = 68%
3.72 ± 1.10 = 95%
3.72 ± 1.65 = 99.7%

11. Decisive

U = 4.65 std. dev. = .5
Thus: 4.65 ± .5 = 68%
4.65 ± 1.0 = 95%
4.65 ± 1.5 = 99.7%

12. Avoid Being Involved in the Emotional Problems of Others

U = 3.12 std. dev. = .59
Thus: 3.12 ± .59 = 68%
3.12 ± 1.18 = 95%
3.12 ± 1.77 = 99.7%

13. Being Frank

U = 5.1 std. dev. = .44
Thus: 5.1 ± .44 = 68%
5.1 ± .88 = 95%
5.1 ± 1.32 = 99.7%

14. Being Sensitive

U = 3.55 std. dev. = .51
Thus: 3.55 ± .51 = 68%
3.55 ± 1.02 = 95%
3.55 ± 1.53 = 99.7%

15. Clinging to Status

U = 4.59 std. dev. = .46
Thus: 4.59 ± .46 = 68%
4.59 ± .92 = 95%
4.59 ± 1.38 = 99.7%