"THE PICNIC": A PERCEPTUAL ERRORS EXERCISE

John E. Dittrich
University of Kentucky

Courses in organizational behavior, communications, and personnel administration nearly always include an extended discussion of the topic of perception and perceptual error. In these discussions, the tendency toward grouping common stimuli and the desire of individuals to maintain a stable and consistent world of objects and people can be pointed out as leading toward the formation of stable social and perceptual sets or groupings. The process of establishing groups of common stimuli in a social sense, however, can be seen as causing two forms of perceptual error to become evident.

THE STEREOTYPE

In the first of these two forms of error, the stereotype, the perceiver tends to base judgments of people based upon preconception described by Walton Lippman as "pictures in people's heads." Allport clarifies the definition of the stereotype by noting that "A stereotype is not identical with a category, it is rather a fixed idea which accompanies the category." [1, p. 1871 He later notes, "the stereotype acts both as a justificatory device for categorical acceptance or rejection of a group, and as a screening or selection device to maintain simplicity in perception and in thinking." [1, p. 188] The process of stereotyping involves three steps: (1) the identification of a category of persons, (2) agreement that certain traits or characteristics should be attributed to that category and (3) the attribution of those characteristics to person belonging in that category. [11, p. 21] The stereotype need not be false. A "kernel of truth," however twisted and distorted, may be the basis for a generalization, and may result in a trait which is common in group members being attributed to all group members without regard for possible individual differences. [1, p. 188, 11, p. 29]

Much of the research on stereotyping has examined racial and ethnic stereotypes [1, Chapter 12, pp. 184-199 and 14, p. 222] and stereotypes based on national origin [7]. Other "categories" however, have associated stereotypes. An international stereotype for teachers and businessmen has been noted by Bruner and Perlmutter [3] and in a study by Haire, "management" and "union" labels for photographs caused quite different impressions to be formed. Indeed, as Luthans comments, "common stereotype groups include managers, supervisors, union members, workers, and all the various functional and staff specialists, eg; accountants and engineers. [9, p. 358] Thus, while the more extensive research has

examined stereotypes as they might affect international, inter- ethnic, or interracial perceptions, the pervasive nature of stereotyped impressions is found in reactions to a number of occupational groups as well.

THE HALO EFFECT

A second major form of error in person perception has been called the "halo" effect, a process in which a general impression (which may be either favorable or unfavorable) is used to evaluate several characteristics or traits. The halo effect arises from the tendency of perceivers to link traits as a means of organizing and simplifying impressions. An analysis of inferences drawn from cue traits by Bruner, Shapiro and Taguiri [4] demonstrated that these inferences are complex and not at all obvious.

In person perception, traits are organized according to evaluation (a good/bad connotation), potency (strong/weak, or dominant/submissive) and activity (energetic/lazy, or active/ passive) [10]. Certain traits seem to have a dominant effect in the organization of impressions. In his classic experiment with college students in 1946, Asch found that the words warm and cold tended to be central in the arrangement of traits. [1]

The halo effect has been found to have its most pronounced effect on perception when the cues are minimal [5]. Thus, the experiment by Kelley in which a speaker was described to one group as (among other traits) warm, and to a second group as cold, resulted in quite different impressions being formed in the minds of listeners [8]. Similarly, a simulated newspaper account of a football team in which the manager was described either as warm or cold was read by groups of college students. In comparing the impressions of the two groups, ratings on nearly half of 13 personality characteristics were found to be quite different. Thus, a fairly simple and relatively minor change in a descriptive account caused quite different impressions to be formed [13].

THE EXERCISE

The research done on these two common forms of perceptual distortion and the potential importance of this error to business administration students as they may be involved in employment interviewing or in supervision, led to the search for a means of providing an experiential way of impressing upon students their vulnerability to these effects.

As with most classroom exercises, simplicity, time (one class period or less), involvement (a maximum proportion of the class should be involved) and effect (easily demonstrable effects) are important if the exercise is to have a significant

experiential impact at reasonable cost.

"The Picnic," the exercise which was developed to address tile perceptual errors, involves a limited amount of deception. Two students are asked to serve as discussants, and to hold that discussion in the presence of the remainder of the class. The two students are each given a task sheet (Appendix 1) which describes the topic which they are to discuss - in this exercise the arrangements for a church picnic. This task sheet does not contain any information that would describe a role. The discussants, therefore approach the task as themselves, have had no preconception as to a role set which they might be seen as occupying.

While the discussants are outside the classroom examining the task sheets, the class is given an introduction in which the discussants' task is described. Class members are then provided with a "role" sheet which contains a "role" description for each of the two discussants (Appendix 2). The class is asked to read the "role" descriptions carefully, then evaluate one of the two persons (the one whose name is handwritten at the top) on the evaluation sheet provided (Appendix 3).

When the class has spent several minutes reading these descriptions, the discussants are returned to the classroom, provided a table, chairs, and place markers to indicate their "names." The discussion is then begun.

Discussions typically last 15 to 20 minutes. The discussants have little difficulty in dealing with the task, and usually exhibit considerable imagination in carrying out the discussion to a highly plausible conclusion.

When the discussion has been completed, the class is asked to complete the questionnaire. As seen in Appendix 3, respondents are asked to describe the extent to which they found their focal discussant receptive, selfish, cooperative, effective, and manipulative. Finally, they are asked to describe the extent to which they liked the discussant.

INDUCTIONS

The "role" sheets and questionnaires, while appearing to be identical, contain several important points that can induce and record perceptual errors. First, while two 'role" descriptions are provided, one discussant is evaluated. All students are asked to evaluate James Johnson. Second, in the role description for James Johnson are embedded either a warm or cold description and one of two occupation descriptions -engineer or school counselor. Thus, while the class believes it is observing two persons, and that each student observer is using a role set description that is the same, in fact the

entire class is concentrating on a single discussant, with one of <u>four</u> different "role" descriptions in mind. These four are warm/school counselor, warm/engineer, cold/school counselor and cold/engineer. (Sec words circled - App. 2)

After the discussion is over and when the evaluation forms have been completed, it is important to carefully debrief the entire class, to make sure that the limited degree of deception has been explained and its necessity understood. To date, students have been intrigued and amused by the modest deception, and have found the exercise interesting and informative rather than threatening or in any way demeaning. Also, and of perhaps more importance, it is necessary to make clear the inductions that were used. It should be pointed out that the class has observed the same discussion, and has concentrated on and evaluated the same discussant, a person who was completely unaware of any role attribution that might be made by the observers. The only differences that can be identified, therefore, are the warm! cold and occupation differences in the role descriptions. Generally, students see these factors as innocuous, and do not believe that this very minor difference in data will result in any systematic distortion in their perceptions of the individual and his actions.

RESULTS

The results in six classes have been quite encouraging. In all six administrations, differences in evaluations significant at the .05 level or better were noted using these modest inductions. (Classes ranged in size from 21 to 46 students). The warm/cold halo effect induction had a more pronounced effect on students' perceptions: significant differences in one or more evaluations were found in five of the six classes. In all four of the classes where the question "My overall impression is that I like the person named above" was asked, the person described as "warm" was liked significantly (p < .05) more than the person described as cold.[1]

The occupational stereotyping induction did not have as strong an impact on these groups as the warm/cold induction: stereotype effects were seen in only three of the six classes. The presence of these effects at all among students not yet exposed to the working world indicates that these impressions are being formed and that their presence may be felt, however, to a somewhat more limited extent.

---

[1] The question was not included in the first two evaluative questionnaires.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The specific results which can be expected from the exercise are moderated to some extent by the effect of the three factors. First, the personalities of the discussants may tend to affect the extent to which perceptions are formed and bias introduced. If the focal person is outspoken, articulate, and the more dominant of the two, impressions may be formed more clearly and vividly in the 15 or 20 minute discussion. Second, if the character of the communication is more active, with extensive interaction between discussants, then the observers simply have more impressions (or stimuli) with which to base their evaluations. These factors, however, should have a <u>negative</u> relationship to the effects of stereotyping and the halo. As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, the effect of these perceptual biases is more pronounced when the cues are minimal in nature [51. Thus, strong impressions caused by an outspoken and forceful discussant may "overpower" the biasing effect of the induction words. A third factor, of perhaps more importance relative to stereotyping, is the extent to which the class is subject to perceptual error. The warm/cold halo effect is culturally based, and is found as a part of the <u>early</u> impression and perceptual organization processes of each person in our culture. The occupational stereotyping induction, however, is more likely to be formed <u>later</u> in the development process, and should be less prominent in younger observers.

If the exercise is to be an effective learning experience, however, it should provide a convincing demonstration of the perceptual distortion that students can internalize...that is to say...clear evidence of distortion of their own perceptions. In this exercise, clear evidence of distortion is seen by using the warm/cold induction, but less reliable results were found across stereotype groupings. The most obvious area of needed additional study and improvement for the exercise is therefore that of identifying and developing a stereotypic pair of stronger impact. An occupational pair would be ideal in that these stereotypes would focus on work related perceptual bias. A work related pair which has been demonstrated in earlier research to have clearly defined cultural character would be that of union official and company manager. The work of Haire [6] mentioned earlier, and that of Stagner [12] have indicated that these occupations are related to strong stereotypes, and should therefore be used in future administrations in place of those seen in Appendix 2.

As an experiential learning exercise, "The Picnic" has a number of useful attributes and seems worthy of continued improvement and use. First, it works. It induces one or both of the major forms of perceptual distortion. Second, it enables all but two class members to participate in the perception process, thereby extending the effect to a high proportion

of the class. Third, the inductions are nearly always seen by class members as very minor and of limited potential impact. When the consistent and strong effect of these seemingly innocuous descriptive words is revealed, the significance of the effect is therefore enhanced. At this point the instructor has a natural and very meaningful entree into topics such as reliability and validity of interviewing as a personnel selection device, the use of reference checks in selection, the practice of retaining old performance ratings in performance appraisal, and the effects of various labels in supervision and education.

APPENDIX 1

Assignments for Discussants

Ed Winters

The two of you (yourself and James Johnson) have been asked by your church young men's group to discuss ways and means of organizing the 40 men in that group to handle the early summer church picnic, and to arrive at a recommendation. In the past, the young men have handled all arrangements except for the specifics of dishes of food to be brought by various ladies. This has been handled by the Women's Club. You have discussed the picnic with your friends and find that they agree with your view as to how the picnic is to be arranged. You want to be sure that their views and yours are incorporated in the plan. Try to reach a recommendation in 10 or 15 minutes.

APPENDIX 2

CLASSROOM EXERCISE: The Picnic

Two members of the class will be discussing ways of organizing a young men's group to make arrangements for a church picnic.

```
James Johnson:   James has been a member of the church for
                 6 1/2 years, has two small children, and works
                 as a school counselor in the community.  He
                 has been described by his associates as, on
                 the whole, being intelligent, warm, determined,
                 practical, skillful and industrious, and is
                 considered very influential in his group and
                 in the church.

Ed Winters:      Ed has been with the church for somewhat less
                 time, four years.  He has three children, and
                 works in the Postal Service.  His fellow
                 workers consider him to be a good family man,
```

considerate of his friends, responsive to requests for help, and a steady, if not brilliant work associate. He can always be counted on to help in the activities of the group.

After the discussion, please write on the next page your impression of the conduct of the discussion.

APPENDIX 3

You are asked to observe and comment on the conduct of

James E Johnson

1. Was the person named above receptive to the ideas of the other?

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

2. Did he seem to be selfish?

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

3. Did he appear to you to be cooperative?

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

4. Did he seem to you to be effective?

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

5. Did he try to manipulate the other person?

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

6. My overall impression is that I like the person named above:

Not at all   Occasionally   Sometimes   Often   Very much so
    1   2   3   4   5

REFERENCES

1.   Allport, C. W. "The Nature of Prejudice," Cambridge, Mass. Addison-Wesley, 1954.

2.   Asch, S. "Forming Impressions of Persons," Journal of <u>Abnormal and Social Psychology</u>, V60 (1946), pp. 258-290.

3.   Bruner, J. S. and Perlmutter, H. V. "Compatriot and Foreigner: A Study of Impression Formation in Three Countries," <u>Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology</u>, V55, (1957) pp. 253-260.

4.   Bruner, J. S., Shapiro, D., and Taguiri, R. "The Meaning of Traits in Isolation and in Combination." In R. Taguiri and L. Petrullo (eds.) <u>Person Perception and Interpersonal Behavior</u>. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1958, pp. 277-288.

5.   Bruner, J. S., and Taguiri, R. "The Perception of People" in C. Lindzey (ed.) <u>Handbook of Social Psychology</u>, Vol. 1, Cambridge, Mass. Addison-Wesley, 1954, pp. 601-633.

6.   Haire, M. "Role Perceptions in Labor-Management Relations: An Experimental Approach," Industrial Labor Relations Review, Vol. 8 (1955) pp. 204-216.

7.   Karlins, M., Coffman, T. L. and Walters, C. "On the Fading of Social Stereotypes: Studies in Three generations of College Students," <u>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</u>, 1969, V13, pp 1-16.

8.   Kelley, H. H. "The Warm-Cold Variable in First Impressions of Persons," <u>Journal of Personality</u>, V18, (1950) pp. 431-439.

9.   Luthans, F. "Organizational Behavior - A Modern Behavioral Approach to Management," New York, McGraw-Hill, 1973.

10.   Rosenberg, S., and Sedlak, A. "Structural Representations of Implicit Personality Theory," in L. Berkowitz (ed.) <u>Advances in Experimental Social Psychology</u>, V6, New York: Academic Press, Inc. 1972, pp. 235-297.

11.   Secord, P. F. and Backman, C. W. "Social Psychology," 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, 1974.

12.   Stagner, R. "Psychology of Industrial Conflict," (New York, 1956) p. 35.

13.   Warr, P. B. and Knapper, C. "The Perceptions of People and Events," London: John Wiley and Sons, 1968.

14.   Zalkind, S. S. and Costello, T. W. "Perception: Sortie Recent Research and Implications for Administration," Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 7 (1962) pp. 218-235.