

## PERSON PERCEPTION AND THE EVALUATION OF ABORIGINAL TOPICAL ART: HOW TO CHANGE STEREOTYPES

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A study of impression formation was made. The evaluation of products by stimulus persons was found to be affected by the adaptation-level concept, the contrast-assimilation principle, and balance theory concepts. Discrepant information produced cognitive reorganization and overevaluation. Two experimental groups ( $n = 54$ ) participated in 1 of 2 conditions. In the first, a white stimulus person appeared as the "artist" of 10 drawings; in the second condition, an Aboriginal "artist" claimed authorship of the identical products. Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate the drawings on an open-ended question and the semantic differential. The results show that the drawings attributed to the Aboriginal "artist" produced more positive impressions and were rated more highly on the semantic differential. These data support the importance of developing minority models to counter predominant stereotypes in the white community.

*Keywords:* Aboriginal art, person perception, evaluation, stereotype change.

To form impressions and make decisions in society, people need information. In the absence of concrete information, stereotypes fill the gap, thereby permitting easy categorization and decision-making. The functional value of stereotypes in impression formation can readily be seen. For example, without some attitude or stereotype about products, weekly shopping would be unbearably long and indecisive. Stereotypes created by advertisement permit ready categorization and decision-making. Research shows that people will readily make decisions about other people, with little information or even in the absence of any meaningful information (e.g., Doise et al., 1972).

In a historical study, Asch (1946) demonstrated the impression-formation process in the presence of minimal information. Participants were told that a list of characteristics belonged to a person, and were then asked to form an impression of the person described. Despite the identical lists of characteristics, the written impressions varied greatly between participants. Additionally, certain central cues (e.g., warm, cold) tended to dominate the impression (see also Kelley, 1950). Since certain traits became central in the description of the person's character, it may be concluded that people have a preference for simple and elementary modes of description. The ability to expand on existing stimuli was shown by the fact that the impressions often included qualities not

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a part of the original list of characteristics. Some writers even gave a physical description of the person.

Information about group membership aids impression formation (e.g., Pepitone & Hayden, 1955). People will seek to resolve apparent incongruities in the information provided to achieve a consistent and logical impression. In evaluating products or communications by stimulus persons, Asch (1952) found that such judgments are dependent on the reputation of the stimulus person. In this study, the meaning of identical statements was found to be a function of the stereotypes of the "authors". One statement derived from Jefferson read: "I hold it that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms are in the physical". This statement was in one case attributed to Jefferson, and in another to Lenin. The meaning of the communication was found to vary widely, depending on the alleged authorship. Stereotypes therefore determine the value of products (e.g., communications).

The early work in person perception focused on the accuracy of perceptions (Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954). This rather sterile approach begged the question of how a person went about forming his impressions of the world. Cronbach (1958) criticized this approach and suggested that we need to understand the individual's personal map of the world. Each person has an implicit theory of personality; i.e., we all have assumptions about psychology and human nature. Our impressions are based on these stereotypes. The analogy of the diagnostic process of the doctor (employing a few desperate cues) is apparent.

Passini and Norman (1966) showed that certain basic dimensions (implicit personality theory) were employed in rating tasks, whether the stimulus persons were strangers or long-term acquaintances. These factors included extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and culture. These factors work much in the same manner as racial stereotypes, since they permit quick and efficient judgment with little or no information. We structure and organize our world on the basis of such implicit theories or stereotypes.

The importance of understanding impression formation and person perception lies in the relationship of perception to behavior. If we know how a person structures his world, we also will, to a large extent, understand the behavioral concomitants and its reasons. Kelly (1963) stresses this point that individual behavior is largely determined by the psychological constructs used to anticipate and interpret social events. Understanding the individual's constructs gets to the core of the person.

The importance of these constructs, basic factors, or stereotypes is outlined in the example used by Sampson (1971). When people converse they frequently do not speak with each other; rather they appear to conduct a conversation between the self and some "construed image of the other" (p. 13). Apart from the obvious misunderstandings arising from miscommunication, it is important to realize that behavior tends to be consistent with these construed images.

The idea of the implicit theory is that people can, in varying situations, make relatively rapid decisions with little information. The individual will build on whatever bits of information are available, and then form hypotheses about the reality of the situation. This is evident in studies on experimental effects (e.g., the so-

called Rosenthal effect). The expectations of the experimenter were frequently found to affect the experimental outcomes (Rosenthal, 1966, 1967). This led Rosenthal to a consideration of the importance of nonverbal cues (1967), since decisions were obviously made in the absence of overt communication.

There are reliable judgmental principles which determine impression formation and constitute the basis of the implicit theory. These include the adaptation level concept derived from the work of Helson (1964) and the contrast-assimilation principle formulated in social judgment theory (Hovland et al., 1957). The adaptation level refers to a zone of relative neutrality along a stimulus dimension. This zone is utilized as a comparison standard in making judgments. Social experience determines the adaptation level; for example, if a person is used to very hot climates, his adaptation level will correspond and he will judge other climates accordingly. The work on the contrast-assimilation principle suggests that within a certain range we tend to see people as more similar to ourselves than they really are, and beyond that range we contrast people; so we see others as being more different than they are. The degree to which we assimilate or contrast people or issues has been found to be a function of ego involvement in the issue (Hovland et al., 1957) and cognitive style (relative dogmatism; Larsen, 1971).

A link between the adaptation-level concept and interpersonal relations is found in the exchange model by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). The basic idea is that each interaction has a reward-cost value, and the difference between the two is called the outcome. The comparison level is the person's standard for evaluating the attractiveness of the interaction outcomes, and corresponds to the adaptation level. It is the level of reward minus the cost – that outcome which the individual thinks he deserves in each interaction.

The study reported in this paper concerns impression formation under conditions where the stimulus persons are racially different, but present identical products for judgment. Would the racial variance of the stimulus persons be sufficient to produce differential response? What would be the situational or background information available for the respondent's implicit theory? Further, would intervening principles (variables) predict the direction of a judgment?

We know from other studies (e.g., Larsen, 1977) that white Australian college students have a negative stereotype of Aborigines, which includes as prominent descriptions the following stereotypes: "lazy, superstitious, wasteful with money, unreliable, unambitious, and drunk". Therefore, the product of an Aboriginal person – in this study an artist – will be judged in the light of those expectations. Aboriginal people are not expected to do well at tasks requiring high degrees of skill, ambition, and persistence.

Another way of stating this idea is that white respondents have a low adaptation level in evaluating products of Aborigines. Should a product of obvious competence be presented, the low adaptation level would cause an overevaluation. Balance theory would make a similar prediction. Competent artistic productions would produce a state of cognitive imbalance (since it is incongruent with previous cognitions). This imbalance is experienced as psychologically unpleasant, and a state of balance is achieved by overevaluating the products of the Aboriginal artist. Thus the overevaluation would

balance the new and unexpected perceptions. Discrepant stimuli also affect the assimilation and contrast ranges. They widen the assimilation range by challenging pre-existing boundaries and defining new dimensions as belonging to the stimulus person. Thus we see that adaptation level, balance, and social judgment theories all would predict an overevaluation of the same artistic product if the stimulus person were Aboriginal. A white artist would be expected to perform at a competent level, therefore producing no need to reorganize cognitions. The white artist would therefore elicit a less enthusiastic judgment.

Consequently, it is expected that impression formation of the same stimuli (artistic drawings) will differ between stimulus persons who vary on race. The drawings of the Aboriginal "artist" will be overevaluated in comparison with those of the white "artist".

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Undergraduate male and female college students at James Cook University ( $N=54$ ) participated in one of two experimental conditions.

### INSTRUMENTS

Ten artistic drawings depicting a variety of topics were employed in the study. These topics included a campfire, a river scene with canoe, fishing, a trail, a sunset, an animal scene, an Aboriginal man, an Aboriginal woman, an Aboriginal boy, and an Aboriginal girl. These drawings were presented as products of the artist. The participants completed a post-treatment survey. The survey asked one open-ended question: "What do these drawings mean to you?" We also asked the participants to evaluate the drawings on the evaluative dimension of the semantic differential.

### EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

In one experimental situation, a white woman appeared ( $n = 26$ ); in the second, an Aboriginal woman ( $n = 28$ ). The women were both in their early twenties and wore neat and comparable clothing.

In each of the experimental situations the white and Aboriginal stimulus persons made the identical statement, "I am thinking about applying to art school and would like some common-sense opinions about my drawings. What I have tried to demonstrate in these drawings are various aspects of Aboriginal life. The other day I talked to Mr (instructor's name) about my interest in getting some feedback. He suggested that I could present the drawings to you and you could in turn evaluate them. In order to be sure that everyone expresses their opinions freely. I will ask Mr (instructor's name) to hand out and collect the evaluation forms."

The drawings were then displayed, the stimulus person left, and the instructor distributed the aforementioned anonymous survey. Both experimental groups came from the same undergraduate course, representing sections taught in the early afternoon, but on different days. We can, therefore, be assured that the two samples came from the same "population". Therefore, any differences in response must be attributed to the experimental treatment.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The hypothesis stated the expectation that drawings presented by an Aboriginal “artist” would be overevaluated in comparison with those presented by a white “artist”. The impressions created by the two stimulus persons to the open-ended question “What do these drawings mean to you?” are shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**IMPRESSION FORMATION OF IDENTICAL DRAWINGS PRESENTED BY ABORIGINAL AND WHITE**  
**STIMULUS PERSONS IN TWO EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS**

	Aboriginal “Artist”	White “Artist”
Negative responses	1	13
Positive responses	19	4
Neutral	8	9

The results show that participants develop an implicit theory of the meaning of the drawings, dependent partly on the racial identity of the stimulus person. Secondly, we note the large variety of responses from very simple (e.g., “nothing”) to very complex evaluations. Impression formation is a function of the stimuli presented and the varying experience of the participants. Combined, they project meaning to the evaluation.

Responses to the Aboriginal “artist” show an appreciation of the talent of the artist and the themes she chose. Appreciation for her talent is expressed by such comments as “enough potential”, “good perception”, “extremely talented”, “adequate drawing”, “well drawn”, “good”, “clever Aboriginal talent”, “effort and ambition”, “more than half interesting”, “shows promise , cleverly drawn”, and “quite exceptional”. The themes are also generally positively valued “very pleasing”, “strong outdoor appeal”, “atmosphere of peace and tranquility”, “a moving experience”, “character and lifelike”, “depicting nature and the love of it”, “nature scenes”, “pictures which very few artists present”, and “gratifying”. On the whole, the drawings received a rather enthusiastic reception when presented by an Aboriginal stimulus person. The responses to the white “artist” reflect a drastically different evaluation. The evaluations are predominantly negative or neutral. The impressions formed once again reflect the themes and talent of the “artist”. Talent responses show only two positive evaluations, “detailed representation and well done”, and “artistically pretty good”. The negative responses for talent include “mediocre talent”, “not much – nothing – unaffected – very little” (nine responses), (did not) “capture realistic atmosphere”, (not) “much value...artistically or...information”. The responses for the themes followed a similar negative or neutral pattern, “symbolizing”, “outdoor way of life”, “a little misleading”, “cannot see relationship”, “aspects of Aboriginal culture”, “in their natural state”, “changing aspects”, “don’t fit my (stereotyped) ideas of Aboriginal life”, and “living in semi-social environment”. Only two theme-type responses are judged positive, “peace within the scenes”, and “overall ... they are good”.

The responses to this open-ended question show that impression formation focuses

on two basic elements of the drawings. The first element refers to the talents of the artist, whereas the second evaluates the content (themes) of the drawings. As we saw, the evaluation of the identical drawings produced different evaluations depending on whether the artist was Aboriginal or white. The Aboriginal stimulus person was positively evaluated in terms of talent, and “her” drawings were seen as authentic representations of Aboriginal life. The white “artist”, on the other hand, was viewed negatively or neutrally by nearly all the respondents. Her talent was viewed with misgivings, and the themes were perceived in negative or neutral terms. The results strongly support the aforementioned hypothesis.

These impressions would likely also be reflected in the rating of the drawings on the semantic differential. To evaluate differences between the two experimental groups, a t test analyzing for group mean differences was completed. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND T TESTS FOR THE TWO EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS, ANALYZING FOR DIFFERENCES IN EVALUATING DRAWINGS ON EVALUATIVE FACTORS OF SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL**

Groups	M	SD	t	p
White “artist”	27.42	4.24		
Aboriginal “artist”	32.93	4.23	-4.78	0.000

Here a high mean score reflects positive evaluation. The results indicate that the work of the Aboriginal “artist” is evaluated significantly more positively than that of the white artist. An examination of the mean differences for the six constituent adjectives shows that the work of the Aboriginal stimulus person is evaluated more positively on all the dichotomous descriptions, with t values ranging from -2.00 for kind-cruel, to -5.74 for good-bad. Since the good-bad dimension contributed most to the variance of the evaluative factor of the semantic differential, and since we found the largest mean difference for this dichotomous description (as well as a significant mean difference for the total score of the evaluative factor), we can conclude with confidence that topical art produced by an Aboriginal “artist” is more positively valued than the same drawings attributed to a white “artist”.

## CONCLUSION

We discussed a theory of impression formation for products and concepts, and for interpersonal behavior. In the evaluation of products (e.g., artistic creations), certain principles are paramount. The adaptation-level concept, the contrast-assimilation principle, and balance theory all predict certain outcomes for discrepant information. Discrepant information produces a low or high adaptation level, changes the ranges for contrast and assimilation, and produces imbalance and psychological discomfort. The response is cognitive reorganization and overevaluation of the product in question.

This proposition was tested by presenting a series of identical drawings to two experimental groups. In one case the drawings were attributed to an Aboriginal stimulus person, and in the other situation a white “artist” appeared. The results confirmed the above hypothesis. The open-ended responses showed that the stimu-

lus-elicited evaluations described either the talents of the artists or content of the drawings. In the case of the Aboriginal "artist", these evaluations were positive; whereas the white "artist" elicited mainly negative or neutral responses. Examining mean differences on the semantic differential between the two experimental situations shows a significant *t* value, with the drawings attributed to the Aboriginal "artist" evaluated more highly.

The process of impression formation and the differential response attributed to the expectations associated with racial categorization was investigated. The results suggest that a challenge to these expectations or stereotypes produces favorable responses to the minority stimulus person. Although the study was not an attitude change study in design, it has implications for attitude change. In the absence of any other stimuli, we would expect that evaluation of products (e.g., artistic drawings) would be consistent with social stereotypes. Prevalent stereotypes for Aborigines are less than complimentary. Consequently, one would expect, on the basis of logic and consistency, that the evaluation of products attributed to Aborigines would match expectations.

However, the findings show that the drawings attributed to the Aboriginal "artist" are valued more highly than the same drawings attributed to a white "artist". This suggests a reorganization from a common-sense expected negative evaluation to the more positive evaluation; i.e., stereotypic change. The differences between the two conditions must be attributed to the effect of discrepant information produced by the obvious competency of the drawings and the resulting effect on adaptation level, contrast-assimilation ranges, and cognitive imbalance. These intervening variables reorganized cognitions resulting in the relative positive evaluations for the Aboriginal "artist". What are the implications of these results for interracial social policy?

Results gained in this study show the importance of presenting stereotypic discrepant information to people since such information can lead to improved attitudes toward Aborigines and other minority groups. Stereotypes are based on expectations of how people live and behave, and can be easily changed when challenged by incongruent information. To understand these phenomena, it is important to comprehend the conceptual distinction between social attitudes and stereotypes. Social attitudes are rooted in social norms and characterized – by their effective and therefore irrational component. Stereotypes, by contrast, refer to beliefs and expectations of behavior, where affect plays a lesser role. As Larsen et al. (1969) noted, "These results may be interpreted as a change in stereotypes due to exposure to incongruent stereotype behavior. These changes then are not changes in norm-relevant social attitudes, but rather changes in stereotype...A primary fact of social attitudes apparently is that they are well grounded in reference group norms. We suggest this is the most salient difference between stereotypes and social attitudes" (p. 157).

It is only by making this conceptual distinction between attitudes and stereotypes that certain research results make sense. La Piere's (1934) classical study showed a discrepancy between what people said they would do (refuse Chinese entrance to their accommodations), and what they actually did when confronted with a well-dressed Chinese couple (few rejections). La Piere was obviously studying stereotypic behavior. When people were presented with discrepant information (counter

model), i.e., a well-dressed Chinese couple, the stimuli challenged the stereotype and hence the discrimination. Likewise, the Minard (1952) study of black and white miners showed that integrated miners developed more positive "attitudes" toward job-related items, but with little carryover to nonjob situations. The relative ready improvement on the job-related areas can at least partly be accounted for by the confrontation of invalid stereotypes. The Minard study also suggests that this confrontation must be carried into all fields of life.

It is suggested that most factors which govern interpersonal, and especially intergroup relations, are based on stereotypes and not attitudes. With the exceptions of the occasional ego-involved bigot, the vast majority of people base their prejudice and discriminatory behavior on stereotypes. When these stereotypes are challenged and their structural support removed, stereotypic prejudice is easily changed toward a more humanistic direction. The problem is not in the resistance of stereotypes; it lies in the support generated for stereotypic prejudices from inequality of relations and commonly accepted expectations of minority behavior (norms).

However, along with the dismantling of the structural and normative framework, black people are directly challenging racial stereotypes. In the United States, opportunities opened up and many showed their expertise in professional, governmental, and business careers. Where earlier in history there were few, now we have black attorneys, college professors and supreme court justices. These people have directly challenged stereotypes, causing many whites to reorganize their beliefs and cognitions about black people.

Even in the absence of structural and normative changes, it is possible to change stereotypic prejudice. The reason is that the absence of a resistant-affective component brings other, more cognitive variables into play. Therefore, if the stereotype no longer seems reasonable, logical, or consistent, it may be discarded. Both the La Pierre and Minard studies show stereotypic change under conditions where these stereotypes were challenged.

The conclusion we draw from the results of the study is to encourage the elimination of racial stereotypes through the development of counter models. This proposal calls for active training programs to develop Aboriginal and minority urban leadership in active roles in publicly visible positions of responsibility. Australia needs black teachers, lawyers, dentists, ballet dancers, police, and others in positions of public trust and respect. It is, of course, not easy to raise to positions of leadership people who are both psychologically scarred and socially damaged from lifetimes of discrimination. It calls for more than a *laissez-faire* attitude from government or the offering of Aboriginal study grants. Without a concerted effort at recruiting and training, success is not likely. In the formal academic environment, tutorial support must be specially developed to counter the environmental deprivations affecting nearly all black people in Australia.

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