ABSTRACT

        Only by being aware of the variables present when
person "A" perceives person "B" ("person perception") can the student
of industrial communications effectively draw impressions of others
as an interviewer. The purpose here is to summarize pertinent
research findings on person perception and to illuminate their
utility to the interviewer. The interviewer's awareness of these
findings and his following of the prescriptions set forth in the
latter portion of the paper will assist him in performing his task
more reliably and efficiently. These prescriptions should be a part
of every course in which interviewing is studied and should occupy an
important segment of future books on the topic. (EE)

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PERSON PERCEPTION and the INTERVIEWER

by

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A Summary of the Major Findings in Person Perception Research

and Some Applications for the Interviewer

The student of industrial communications is invariably given instruction in interviewing. A survey of the writings on the topic reveal many good books on the subject.[1] Suprizingly however, they all overlook an extremely crucial area of research. That research area has been called "Person Perception." It consists of numberous studies which focus on the variables and processes involved when Person A perceives Person B.[2] Only by being aware of these variables and processes (including the points at which our perceptions can become distorted, as well as the reasons why) can the interviewer effectively draw impressions of other people.

My purpose here is to summarize pertinent research findings in "Person Perception" and to show their utility for the interviewer. A knowledge of these principles and their application is essential if he is to perform his task reliably and efficiently. It is my hope therefore that teachers of industrial communications will utilize there findings when providing instruction in interviewing, and that future authors of texts on the subject will provide adequate treatment of this important area of study.

Interestingly, early research on "Person Perception" proceeded from the naive assumption that without knowing anything about the variables or processes involved in perceiving others, psychologists could identify those personality types who could consistently perceive other accurately. Their hope was that such gifted individuals could then be placed in positions which required this ability -- positions such as counsellors, psychotherapists and interviewers.[3] Between 1933 and 1950, numberous monographs appeared in psychological journals. After 17 years of research, however, few worthwhile findings were uncovered.

During the early '50's alert psychologists began to realize that far too little was known about the variables and processes involved in perceiving others to formulate conclusions about who is a more accurate perceiver.[4] The naive assumption persists, however. Laymen generally assume that certain "types" of people have a gift of being able to perceive others accurately. These "types" still find themselves in the positions of pastors, priests and interviewers.

Research conducted over the past twenty years has shown that the following postulates regarding person perception are true:

1. Person Perception is an active process involving an interaction between the perceiver and ther person perceived. The perceiver selects and categorizes, interprets and infers that data he "sees" in another.[5]

2. Some of the factors affecting person perception are the perceiver's <u>past experience</u> ("the last time I met someone who talked this way..."), <u>language</u> (linguistic relativity), <u>motivational state or goals</u> (the football coach sees Joe College differently from his Physics instructor), <u>and the conditions under which perception takes place.</u>[6]

3. Perceivers seek out invariant properties of other people, in order to give their image stability and predictive value. We infer personality traits on the basis of very little observed behavior. But we do so to save time and to avoid the necessity of painfully "suspending judgement."[7]

4. We all carry around within us implicit theories of personality whereby we think of certain personality traits as necessarily associated with others (e.g., if we know that someone is "agressive", we may also think that he is "unfeeling").[8]

5. Stereotypes (physical, racial and linguistic) are an active (and not altogether undesirable) part of our perceptions of other people. The less similar a person is to us, the more likely we are to rely on stereotypes.[9]

6. Depending on whether we are cognitively complex or cognitively simple (i.e., whether we have many or few conceptual categories in terms of which we think of other people) we differently process conflicting data about another person. The cognitively complex individual who perceives someone as possessing apparently incongruent traits (e. g., an agressive person who is also warm and sensitive) will attempt to integrate these traits into his total impression of the other person.

3.

The cognitively simple person is likely to disregard some of the
conflicting data, either by "forgetting" then or by some other means.[10]

7.   There appear to be identifiable personality variables which go hand in

with cognitive simplicity and cognitive complexity. The cognitively simple

person also tends to be somewhat more authoritarian, and less intelligent

than the complex one, and to have a lower tolerance of ambiguity.[11]

With this last research finding, we have just about come full circle. We

began by reporting that early psychologists sought to identify "Personality

types" who were able to perceive others accurately. We have ended our very

brief summary of research results by noting that such personality variables as

degree of authoritairaneness, level of intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity

play an active role in forming an impression of another. However, we have made

an imprtant change in focus -- one which deserves to be pointed out. We, like

the current researchers in "Person Perception", are not directly with who

perceives whom accurately, but with how a certain someone perceives another

individual. Our focus is the process by which person A perceives person B,

and the variables involved. Thus, degree of authoitarianism, level of intelli-

gence and tolerance of ambiguity do not identify accurate obserevers; they

merely play a role in the process by which inconsistent data are dealt with by

percievers.

There is much to be done in the field of "Person Perception". Not unti'

valid findings are accumulated can anyone say with difinity just what the in-

terviewer should do to form an accurate impression of another. What we can

say is that he should be aware of the findings presented in this paper, and

should let his awareness of them enhance his performance of his role. How can

this be done?

First of all, the interviewer should abandon the notion that he is an accurate or "objective" observer of other people. Research has shown that there is no such thing. The interviewer should be aware of his sterotypes, his past experiences and his motives o, objectives; he should try to identify the role these play in his perceptions of others. Awareness of their influence is an essential first step if his perceptions are to have even a modicum of validity.

Secondly, he should be particularly cautious of what students of argumentation call the "genetic fallacy." That is, he should beware of hastily formulating an hypothesis about someone ("he's insecure") and then interpreting subsequent data in light of that hypothesis. The fallacy that "good people do good things" results from just such incautious thinking. Research has shown a tendency on the part of people to behave this way consistently.[12] The interviewer can not afford this luxury.

Thirdly, the interviewer should become aware of his own implicit theory of personality. He should recognize what traits he thinks cluster about one another. And he should be careful of letting his theory of personality operate as fact when he perceives others. (For a simple device which can bring our implicit theories of personality to our awareness, see the experimental work of Bruner et al.)[13]

Finally, he should be particularly cautious when faced with apparently inconsistent data eminating from a certain observee. How ill he handle this data? Will he disregard data which conflicts with his first-formed impression of the other? Will he let the most recently perceived trait determine his overall impression? Or will he tend to incorporate all data when forming an impression? Any repeated patterns in dealing with inconsistent data can tell a great deal about the observer. The interviewer should be aware of any such

patterns which typify him, and should be particularly careful of letting himself play too great a role in influencing his perceptions of others.

I have briefly summarized the person perception research and shown its applicability to the interview situation. The interviewer's awareness of these findings, and his following the prescriptions set down in the latter part of the paper, will most certainly help him perform his task more reliably and efficiently. They should be a part of every course in which interviewing is dealt with, and should occupy an important segment of future books on the topic.

1. See for example, R. L. Kahn & C. F. Cannell, The Dynamics of Interviewing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957), and R. L. Gordon, Interviewing: Strategy Techniques & Tactics (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1969)

2. For an excellent text on the topic, see Albert H. Hastorf, David Schneider and Judith Polefka, Person Perception (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1970).

3. See P. E. Vernon, "Some Characteristics of the Good Judge of Personality," Journal of Social Psychology, 4 (1933) 42-58.

    The current sensitivity training rage seems to follow the same sort of pattern. Many trainers argue that by inculcating certain personality traits in people, these individuals will be more sensitive to others and hence (by implication) better able to perceive them accurately. There is no evidence to support this claim. See Henry Clay Smith, Sensitivity to People (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 7-8.

4. See, for example A. H. Hastorf and I. E. Bender, "A Caution Respecting the Measurement of Empathic Ability, "Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, 47 (1952), 574-76, and L. J. Cronbach, "Processes Affecting Scores on 'Understanding of Others and Assumed Similarity,'" Pschological Bulletin, 52 (1955), 177-93.

5. See Hastorf, Schneider & Polefka, op cit, p. 13. The following monographs are among those which reported the results of research which led to this conclusion: "A Study of the Phenomenon of Differential Motivation Control of the Utilization of Habits, "Journal of Genetic Psychology, 46 (1935), 3-40. R. Schafer & G. Murphy,"The Role of Autism in a Visual Figure-Ground Relationship," Journal of Experimental Psychology, 32 (1943) 335-43. S. M. Dornbush, A. H. Hastorf, S. A. Richardson, R. E. Muzzy and R. S. Vreeland, "The perceiver & Perceived: their Relative influence on Categories of Interpersonal Perception, "Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, I (1965), 434-40.

6. The following monographs are among those which reported the results of research which led to this conclusion: Leeper, op cit; Schafer & Murphy, op cit; Dornbush et al, op cit; A. R. Cohen, "Cognitive Tuning as a Factor Affecting Impression Formation, "Jornal of Personality, 29 (1961), 235-45.

7. Hastorf, Schneider, Polefka, pp. 13-14. See also Smith, op cit, pp. 18-20.

8. Hastorf, Schneider & Polefka, pp. 39-47. The work of Solomon Asch is essential here. See his Social Psychology (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

9. See Jesse G. Delia, "Dialects and the Effects of Stereotypes on Inter- personal Attraction and Cognitive Processes in Impression Formation," Quarterly Hournal of Speech, 58 (October, 19720, 285-97.

10. Hastorf, Schneider & Polefka, pp. 48-59. See for example, the research of I.D. Steiner & H. H. Johnson, "Authoritarianism and 'Tolerance of Trait Inconsistency,' Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, 67 (1963), 388-91. See also, C. W. Mayo & W. H. Crockett, "Cognitive Complexity & Primacy-Recency Effects in Impression Formation, "Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, 68 (1964), 335-88.

11. See D. Byrne, An Introduction to Personality (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

12. See Wayne Minnick, The Art of Persuasion (2nd ed., Boston: Houghton- Mifflin, 1968), pp. 39-42, for a discussion of Bruner & Postman's "Hypotheses Theory of Perception."

13. See J. S. Bruner, D. Shapiro and R. Tagiuri, "The Meaning of Traits in Isolation & Combination," in R. Tagiuri & L. Petrullo, eds. Person Perception and Interpersonal Perception, (Stamford, California: Stamford University Press, 1958).