



First Impression- the Component of Social Perception

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1. Introduction

Social life involves a permanent interaction with others. The quantity of information goes secondary in relation with the importance of our impression about the other. The manner in which each individual creates a personal image for their peers, more or less complete, in accordance with reality, is a part from what they call social perception.

We look at someone and naturally, there appears an impression about their character ... This capacity of discovering some traits from someone's personality, of forming a conception about someone as a human being, a centre of life and volition, which possesses particular characteristics that may form a distinct individuality represent the premise of social life.

The act of meeting one person is very important from a psychological point of view. Its importance is determined by what we call "first impression". This may be a random occurrence or, on the contrary, can be controlled or submitted under clear intentions. It is considered that the first four minutes are crucial for the eventual consequences within the interactional plan even though psychology books affirm that the first five seconds of interaction determine the entire course of the relation. These time markers do not have to be considered parameters as time is not the one

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to define the relation in the future, but the fact whether the ones involved are capable or not to assess and to correctly appreciate the other.

2. Means of Forming Impressions About Others

The formation of the impression about another person is an essential task for social perception. People have at their disposal two sources of information. The first one is represented by the knowledge of the one who perceives. Thus, impressions can be determined by either the unique data or information characteristic for the observed person, or by the knowledge and the beliefs possessed by the one who observes.

Starting from this clarification, we may identify two types of impressions: impressions based on data (on observed behaviours, on data obtained from other people, from other sources) and impressions based on categories (on previous knowledge and beliefs concerning the person who perceives).

Numerous times, the impressions about other are acquired within the time of perception and of direct interaction, meaning in those situations when the perceived person is inside our perceptive field (face to face communication, observing the behaviour from distance, conversation over the phone).

The impression about others can be formed even when that specific person is not presenting our perceptive field indirectly (when that is symbolically represented). We may form our impressions about another person based on some documents or products of their activity (we form our impression about a writer based on their writings).

Sometimes, we just need a few personality traits or characteristics in order to be able to construct a psychological portrait of a person, in order to infer about the behaviour and the beliefs of someone we have not seen before. We can make a selection of some attributes that someone has, so that we may furnish an almost complete image, that would respect the subjective principle of correctness.

This phenomenon shows us that we tend to preserve a certain order and coherence in what we build, in the image of others created by us. We need more subjective validity than objective reality.

Research affirms that the inferences we make about others, be them spontaneous or conscious, influence our social judgements, that we are the prisoners of some reasoning which abandons the laws of logic, opting for subjectivity.

3. Factors which Influence the Formation of Impressions

The first impression is a psychologically complex reality influenced by a gamut of factors related to the one who perceives, as well as to the one who is directly or indirectly perceived. There are three important factors: *expectations, physical attractiveness and similarity*.

The expectations we have, previous for the interaction from which results the formation of impression, largely determine the manner in which the first interactional episodes with an unknown person are experienced. This situation, by its natural form, influences our interactions and our first contact with another person. The nature of this situation determines several behavioural patterns, through the association of certain behaviours to certain situations: the act of socialising exerts the understanding and the assimilation of different behavioural algorithms. In this sense, the act of socialising anchors the individual in the social field, fact which loosens the formation of expectations. In the common sense, expectations are illustrated through the expressions: “I was expecting something else” or “I was not expecting this”.

The expectations concerning the other person are influenced by what we call “the theory of implicit personality”, as they determine what we will like or not about the other. We have a set of expectations for the categorisation of people that take the form of some criteria or attributes, which will guide the impressions that we form.

We have expectations concerning the reasons, the purposes of interaction. We may observe the formation of the impression about the other (this process gains a conscious attitude) or we may form an impression without voluntarily intending to do this (the process thus acquires a spontaneous attitude). Not few times we form impressions about the others without intentionally wanting to do so. Research in this domain has proven that this process can take place outside our consciousness.

Physical attractiveness brings to light the fact that first impressions are more favourable if the other person is physically attractive. But numerous times, the references to the physical appearance are accompanied by psychological connotations.

The similarity between the personal self and the other increases the degree of favourability in within the conditions of an interaction. It may happen that, during our realisation that we have some personality features in common, even though we

have not seen that specific person yet, we have to complete the image with our personal features.

4. Errors in Impression Formation

The formation of impressions, as shown by empiric studies, is a cognitive process which greatly depends on the social context, exposed to errors. These errors can be classified according to their nature.

Thus, the order of presenting information can lead to a series of errors. Asch explained the effect of previous information (primacy effect) through the fact that the formation of impressions is an automatic process. It is triggered from the moment in which we receive the first piece of information about that specific person, that primary bit of information whose influence follows the principle of gestalt, as well as the perception and the inclusion of successive pieces of information.

The effect of the first piece of information was shown also in more natural experimental circumstances. Thus, Park (1986) conducted an experiment in which groups of seven individuals interacted weekly, during a period of seven weeks. Each time, at the end, the subjects made a narrative description for their impressions concerning the other participants. The results obtained proved that the personality traits which resulted from the description of other people at a first meeting (first impression) were more frequent in the final description, in comparison to the ones which appeared in the intermediary descriptions (meetings 2 to 6).

The results which confirm this effect can be explained by the following facts:

- The formation of impressions can be considered an online process, meaning that it starts with the first available bit of information, so that the following ones are distorted by the impression created on the basis of those first pieces of information.
- The first bits of information attract more attention than the subsequent ones; assigning attention influences the manner in which data is processed (the quantity and the quality of the process) which is determined, in the end, by a better mnemonic codification of it.

Alongside the impact of primary information, there are situations in which we are able to observe their reverse, that is the effect of recent information. The explications of this effect can be of different nature, such as:

- Procedural nature- the insufficient cognitive resources that materialise in the absence of attention and sufficient processing of information to the annihilation of the effect of previous bits of information.
- Motivational nature- the improvement motivation of performance shifts the focus towards the recent set of data, that is more actively processed and the comparison of it with the previous data only for the evaluation of the achieved progress.

Not only the order of the data presentation may cause distortions. According to Asch's opinion, some features have a greater impact upon impressions. The personality traits which have a greater impact upon the final impression were defined as central features, as the ones which hold a reduced impact upon the final impression are peripheral features.

Asch's results were also confirmed by Kelly (1950), who showed that the impressions that people have and form about others determined the nature of further interactions by playing the role of some expectations, that transpose in behaviour. These expectations fulfil the role of certain prophecies that fulfil themselves.

The same group of personality analysts, such as Asch and Kelly, was studied by Wydmer and Loy (1988) for a group of 270 students. The results were the same, the main features of a "distant-affective" naturally create expectations which influence the manner in which we interpret the information about the perceived person.

These facts have their meaning in the concept of relevance of information. People select information in order to be able to organise the process of communication with that specific person. Otherwise said, the more central a feature becomes, the greater value it holds for the development of interaction or for the formation of an impression about the other. It is affirmed that central features are those which have organisational valence for the action in almost all situations. People have prepared a set of central features according to which they judge people they meet and about whom they can make inferences.

Research has shown that in the absence of contrary information, people have the tendency to "think positive" about the others, while creating positive impressions. This perceptive distortion was defined as the effect of neutral information. However, if there is negative information about a person, this aspect gains the

overall attention and leads to a disproportionated exacerbation of importance for the information offered in the eventual process of impression formation. This distortion of perception is called the effect of negative information (negativity effect, Fiske, 1980). Once the negative impressions are formed, it is very hard to change them into their positive counterpart.

People are more careful to the negative information due to their unusual and distinctive nature (it is affirmed the fact that this type of information attracts the attention- Skowronski and Carlston, 1989) and also due to their predicament of an eventual danger, so that the detection and the consideration of such data is vital for each individual.

The formation of impressions firstly involves a sort of evaluation. Research determined that the valence of previous data is directly connected to a sort of distortion concerning the initial assessment. This perceptive distortion was defined as an evaluative error or as the halo effect (halo effect, Cooper, 1981). The halo effect proves that, alongside the order of data presentation, the evaluative conduct of information affirms its great importance.

During the process of forming impressions about others, people develop theories concerning the personality (Bruner & Taguri, 1954) or the philosophy of human nature (Wrightsmann, 1964). They contain general principles concerning the manner in which different traits of personality associate in order to create certain types of personality. Thus, our impressions respect the principle of evaluative coherence and the one of descriptive coherence.

The distortions made by people when they form impressions explains how a psychological portrait may be completed, how the lacunary information gains a sort of internal coherence. As we have already seen, even a simple feature may hold important valences, may determine the construction of our image about the other. Sometimes a simple feature may lead to a series of inferences, that have to respect the inner principles of evaluation and correctness

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