Impression formation by the use of central traits

13 participants were placed under test conditions to determine whether there is a difference in the writing of the descriptions and if these differences would result in more conclusions being accurate. As well as this, participants were also tested to determine if there was any change on the impressions formed about an individual because of their type of living conditions, in this case, type of residence. The participants consisted of females and males, and were all level 2 students at Glasgow Caledonian University studying psychology or social sciences. The experiment was carried out in a laboratory setting, in which the participants were divided into different experimental groups. The results showed that for some characteristics there was a significant result, which seems to complement previous studies that impressions are formed by certain characteristics. These findings are discussed.

Introduction

According to Bernstein et al, " Social perception is defined as the process through which people interpret information about others, draw inferences about them, and develop mental representations of them." (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart & Roy, 2006, p. 678). An individual's perception of others is regulated by the laws of perception of objects. This law states that we interpret information with the use of schemas. Self-schemas are developed by individuals through the formation of their social identity and comparison. Brehm et al gives a brief description of self-schemas, " These are mental representations of their beliefs and views about themselves." (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005). Many researchers have argued the importance that schemas play on influencing perception. Experimenters

believe that the schemas help to determine what information should be acknowledged or ignored and also what information is remembered. Smith and Quellar, believe this to be true and state, " As a result, we tend to process information about a person more quickly if it confirms out beliefs." (Smith & Quellar, 2001). First impressions differ with other aspects of social perception, mainly due to the fact that first impressions can be formed swiftly. Several studies have been carried out to help determine if individuals focus on information concerning the traits of others. Asch (1946) states that, " we look at a person and immediately a certain impression of his character forms itself in us." One of the most famous studies concerning impression formations is Solomon Asch's classical study conducted in 1946. In this experiment participants were presented with a list of characteristics that they were instructed belonged to a stranger. Asch then asked the subjects to write a brief description of the stranger and by scoring on a list of traits which they deemed best fit the described stranger. The results indicated that certain characteristics influenced impressions over others. Central traits would strongly influence impressions more than peripheral traits. Asch (1946) stated about his findings " forming impressions of others involves more than simply combining individual traits." As well as this, he was also able to conclude that " central traits" would have a greater impact on the interpretation of " peripheral traits" and that the context also impacts on which way a trait acts, either a " central" or " peripheral" manner. Due to the findings of previous experiments and research studies, this experiment aims to test the belief that the type of residence or descriptive categories will impact the impression formed and also the conclusions made of them. This experiment had two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is, that information

about an individual's residence will impact the descriptions written, which will lead to more correct conclusions of the descriptions than incorrect. The second hypothesis is, that information about an individuals residence will have an impact on the impression formed of some aspects of the individual rather than others. The experiments null hypotheses are, that information about an individual's residence will not impact the descriptions written, which will not lead to more correct conclusions of the descriptions than incorrect. Another null hypothesis is, that information about an individuals residence will not have an impact on the impression formed of some aspects of the individual rather than others. Any differences will be due to chance or experimental error.

Method

Design

The experiments independent variable was the information about an individual's residence. The dependant variable was the impressions formed by the participants. A single blind design was used in this experiment, so that the participants were unaware of the experimental manipulation and also helps to minimize participant bias to a certain extent. The experiment had three different time periods, the first was to allow participants to view their condition, the second was to write their descriptions and the third and final was to complete a character trait scale.

Participants

The experiment consisted of 13 participants, which were taken from a class of level 2, psychology and social science students at Glasgow Caledonian

University. The participants were chosen by opportunity sampling, with the participants volunteering to take part in the experiment as it was a required part of their course. The participants were of mixed age, gender and cultural backgrounds and were put into two different groups at random.

Apparatus

Paper and pens

Condition lists (lists with a short description of a person) (See Appendix A)

Rating of characteristics list (See Appendix B)

Response sheet (See Appendix C)

Class data table

Timer

Procedure

The experiment was carried out in a Laboratory setting, where it would allow for greater control of extraneous variables such as noise, from interfering with the experiment. Participants gave their consent before the experiment and the experimenter made sure that all participants were seated. The participants were then divided into 2 different condition groups, with the conditions being the residence, Council flat or Country house. The experimenter then handed each participant a word list, which related to their condition group. The participants were then informed that they would have a certain amount of time to complete their given task, they were then

instructed to turn over their paper and begin. Participants in both conditions were required to study a list to form their impression and were given clear instructions not to write any notes. The participants were informed when their time was up, and then asked to return their word lists. The experiment then instructed the participants that their task was to write a description based on their impression formed, as before they were given three minutes to complete this. After the allocated 3 minutes were up, the participants were required to submit their descriptions. Participants were then given a Likert scale and informed their task was to rate the person they described on a series of 20 bipolar 7-point scales on the rating of a characteristics form. The experimenter then informed the participants that there was a variable which was the type of residence. Participants were then given a response sheet and told that they would be hearing all of the descriptions they had written previously. They were instructed to decide upon hearing the descriptions whether they believed that person lived in a council flat, condition 1 or country house, condition 2. The experimenter read each description to the participants and they decided the described person's type of residence. The data was then collected for analytical purposes.

Results

Table 1

Mean of Characteristics between Conditions

Characteristic

Condition 1 (Council Flat)

Condition 2 (Country House)

Fashionable

5. 38

5. 62

Eats out

3. 88

5. 12

Cinema often

3. 12

3. 00

Car User

3. 62

4. 75

Active

5. 38

6. 38

Masculine

3. 75

4. 50

Class

3. 12

6. 12

Young

4. 12

3. 75

Educated

4. 25

6. 25

Skilled

4. 12

5. 75

Conservative

4. 00

4. 50

Religious

2. 88

4. 00

Censored

2. 88

3. 88

Racist

1. 88

2. 00

Royalist

2. 62

5. 12

Pleasant

5. 12

5. 88

Kind

4. 62

5. 50

Intelligence

4. 88

6. 62

Warm

6. 00

4. 50

Extravert

5. 12

4. 50

Table 2

Standard Deviation of Characteristics between Conditions

Characteristic

Condition 1 (Council Flat)

Condition 2 (Country House)

Fashionable

1. 188

1. 408

Eats out

2. 357

2. 357

Cinema often

2. 295

2. 000

Car User

2. 615

3. 105

Active

2. 066

0. 744

Masculine

2. 550

2. 563

Class

1. 356

0. 835

Young

0. 641

1. 165

Educated

1. 832

0. 866

Skilled

1. 458

0. 866

Conservative

1. 604

2. 000

Religious

1. 356

1. 414

Censored

1. 126

0. 835

Racist

1. 356

1. 414

Royalist

1. 923

1. 126

Pleasant

1. 126

0. 991

Kind

1. 847

1. 309

Intelligence

1. 126

0. 518

Warm

0. 756

2. 000

Extravert

1. 126

2. 000

Graph 1

Means of Characteristics between Conditions

The results (table 1 and graph 1) show that there were differences between the two condition types. There was an increase in means for fashionable between condition 1 and 2, from 5. 38 to 5. 62, which shows that we believe those who live in country houses wear more expensive clothing. There was an increase in the means for eats out between condition 1 and 2, from 3. 88 to 5. 12, which seems to show that we believe that people in council flats do not tend to go out for meals. Cinema outings showed a decrease between condition 2 and condition 1. Condition 2 had a mean of 3. 00, whereas condition 1 had a mean of 3. 12. Car user, Active, Masculine, and Class all showed an increase in means between condition 1 and 2. Car user increased from 3. 62 to 4. 75, Active increased 5. 38 to 6. 38, Masculine increased from 3. 75 to 4. 50 and Class also increased from 3. 12 to 6. 12. Young showed a

decrease between condition 2 and 1, with condition 1 having a mean of 4. 12 compared to condition 2 which had a mean of 3. 75. Educated, skilled, conservative, religion, censorship, racism, royalist, pleasant, kind and intelligent all showed an increase between condition 1 and 2. Educated increased from 4. 25 to 6. 25. Skilled increased from 4. 12 to 5. 75. Conservative increased from 4. 00 to 4. 50. Religion showed an increase from 2. 88 to 4. 00. Censorship increased from 2. 88 to 3. 88. There was an increase from 1. 88 to 2. 00 for Racism. Royalist showed an increase from 2. 62 to 5. 12. Pleasant increased from 2. 62 to 5. 12. Kind increased from 4. 62 to 5. 50. Intelligent also increased from 4. 88 to 6. 62. Warm and Extravert showed a decrease between condition 2 and 1, with warm decreasing from 6. 00 to 4. 50 and extravert from 5. 12 to 4. 50.

A binomial test was used to determine whether the participant's conclusions were beyond chance. The z value calculated was 9. 69, which shows a significant level.(See Appendix D for calculation) These result of the binomial test indicates that the number of correct responses is significantly greater, at the $p < 0.05$ level, than would be expected by chance.

A Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the scores from participants in condition 1 and condition 2, the council flat and country house. There was a statistically significant difference between scores for the two conditions for only a few of the characteristics.

Class ($n1 = 8$, $n2 = 8$, $U' = 37.0$, $p < 0.05$)

Educated ($n1 = 8$, $n2 = 8$, $U' = 26.0$, $p < 0.05$)

Skilled (n1 = 8, n2 = 8, U' = 12, p <0. 05)

Censorship (n1 = 8, n2 = 8, U' = 15. 0, p <0. 05)

Intelligent (n1 = 8, n2 = 8, U' = 4. 5, p <0. 05)

(See Appendix E for SPSS handout)

Discussion

The results from the experiment were as we had predicted. Participants identified the described person's residence correctly more than they did incorrectly and that there was a greater impression formed on certain aspects of the described person. One of the most interesting observations was that the impression formed for condition 1, the council flat was that they were more likely to use the bus more, were of a lower class, couldn't afford as nice clothes, or treats such as eating out. It seemed the fact they lived in a council flat, the impression that formed was that the person would be stereotypically poor. This is in contrast to condition 2, where the impression formed was that they were of an upper class, most likely a business person who could afford the finer luxuries in life. The results also showed that some characteristics were rated higher than others. For a majority of the results there does not seem to be a significant result. There were some differences that provided statistically significant results which were shown by the use of a binomial test and a Mann-Whitney test. These would seem to support both hypotheses, which were that the information about an individual's residence will impact the descriptions written, which also leads to more correct conclusions of the descriptions than incorrect, and that information about an individual's residence will have an impact on the impression formed of some

aspects of the individual rather than others. The findings of this experiment seem to coincide with Asch's 1946 research, which looked to investigate what would influence individual's impressions. These results suggest that certain central traits strongly influence overall impressions that we form. This experiment can be seen tom complement previous research studies, as the central trait, " residence variable" influenced the overall opinion of our participant. It is these traits that the participant used to form an impression of the entire person described. In relation to the study carried out by Asch, the peripheral traits seemed to be the person's personality and the central trait that influenced the impressions formed by the participant was the residence. There may have been more significant characteristics due to various options. The results my have been compromised by the factors such as motivation, with some students being more willing than others to take part in the experiment. As well as this some of the students that took part may have been aware of the experiment and may have given socially desirable answers which would compromise the results. This study used participants from a university and who were all of roughly the same age. To help improve in further research, it may be wise to use a wider range of participants as 13 is an extremely low number to draw any significant conclusions. Further research may use the methods of transportation as a central trait, with participants given various forms of transport ranging from bikes and buses to luxury cars. Further research may look to try and use a repeated measures design in which the participant would do condition 1, then condition 2, before being told what the variable was.

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