# Studying First Impressions: What to Consider?

January 31, 2018

First impressions are long-lasting. This familiar phrase indicates one of the many reasons that studying people's first impressions is critical for social psychologists. Any information about a person, from her physical properties to her nonverbal and verbal behaviors, and even the environment she inhabits, influences our impressions and judgments about her (e.g., Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Gosling, Ko, Mannarell, & Morris, 2002). First impressions have been shown to last for months (Gunaydin, Selcuk, & Zayas, 2017) and affect personal judgments even in the presence of contradictory evidence about the individual (e.g., Rydell & McConnell, 2006).

This article will briefly discuss some critical aspects of first impressions based on existing social psychological research, including my own.

## Types of First Impressions

What are our first impressions about? Social cognition literature conceptualizes impressions via a number of constructs. The most studied form of impression in social cognition is *traits*; people tend to form split-second impressions with regard to others' presumably stable characteristics, such as trustworthiness and competence. They do this from others' facial appearances (e.g., Willis & Todorov, 2006) and simple behaviors — for example, having observed a person taking an elevator up one flight, people may infer that she is lazy (Uleman, Blader, & Todorov, 2005). The goals, values, and beliefs of others also have been shown to influence first impressions (Moskowitz & Olcaysoy Okten, 2016).

Recent research from our lab has demonstrated the effect of behavior characteristics on first impressions; when initially observed behaviors of others are known or believed to be consistent over time, formation of trait inferences has been observed to be more likely (Olcaysoy Okten & Moskowitz, 2017). Considering the elevator example, having observed the same person taking an elevator up one flight on several occasions, people become more confident in their assessment of this person as lazy. However, when a person takes an elevator up one flight only on a specific occasion, people may believe he wants to be quick in this specific situation.

## Measuring Impressions: Explicit or Implicit?

First impressions are manifested not only in perceivers' explicit reactions but also in their spontaneous inferences. Implicit measures aim to capture the spontaneous impressions that are typically invisible to the perceivers — impressions they have formed without any awareness or intention. While explicit measures of impressions include self-report tests such as ratings of evaluations or inferences, implicit measures include memory tests that measure the extent to which the target person is associated with a construct (such as a trait) in memory. The exact relationship between implicit and explicit forms of impressions has been a controversial question in the field of social cognition (Payne, Burkley, & Stokes, 2008).

Research from many labs has also consistently shown that implicit impressions are resistant to change (e.g., Gregg, Seibt, & Banaji, 2006; Mann & Ferguson, 2015). When changes in impressions do occur, it is typically *explicit*, but not *implicit*, trait inferences that are altered (Olcaysoy Okten & Moskowitz, 2017b). For example, after learning that the person who took the elevator up one flight on several occasions actually works out regularly, perceivers update their initial explicit judgment of her being lazy. However, they still tend to classify the person as lazy in an implicit memory task. Thus, implicit biases can persist and affect interpersonal interactions in significant ways, even when perceivers are convinced that they have changed their impressions in light of new information.

Why does someone form an impression of another person? Research has shown that the answer to this question is critical to determining the way in which people process information about others. Adopting the mindset of a "reporter" whose goal is merely to discover the *facts* about a person might leave one with a completely different impression than adopting the mindset of a person on a blind date. In the former case, perceivers engage in systematic (comprehensive) processing, whereas in the latter case, they tend to rely on heuristics that are consistent with their goal to affiliate with the given person (Chen, Shechter, & Chaiken, 1996). Such motivated processing can trigger a positivity bias in evaluating others.

Impressions also are affected by environmental cues: For example, people perceive an ambiguous behavior differently after being primed to see a trait as "bold" versus "reckless" (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). Perceivers' long-term goals also affect their interpretations of others' actions during first encounters. For example, those who have a higher need to reduce uncertainty in their interpersonal interactions are more likely to infer stable traits from mundane behaviors of others (Moskowitz, 1993) and less likely to change their first impressions even after learning that those impressions were inaccurate (Wyer, 2016).

**Behavioral Implications of First Impressions**

Despite the large literature on the formation of and change in first impressions, less is known about their behavioral consequences (for a review, see Harris & Garris, 2008). Much of the existing research has focused on behavioral consequences of first impressions related to an existing stigma. In these studies, perceivers' stigma-related impressions resulted in discriminatory practices, such as avoidance of interaction and experience of physiological threat during such interactions (e.g., Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2000; Peck & Denney, 2012).

Other research has focused on the outcomes in the domain of job recruitment. First impressions significantly predict employers' behavioral tendencies during job interviews as well as their ultimate recruitment decisions (Barrick, Swider, & Stewart, 2010; Swider, Barrick, & Harris, 2016). Specifically, employers tend to ask questions that confirm their first impressions about the candidates and treat them in ways that are consistent with such impressions (Snyder & Swann, 1978). If their initial impressions of the candidates are positive, employers show a higher tendency to "sell" the job by providing information to the candidates about the job rather than gathering information from them (Dougherty, Ebert, & Callender, 1986; Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994). In turn, employers' warmer behaviors typically elicit warmer behaviors from the candidates (e.g., Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid, 1977), and thus the employers' initial positive impressions about the candidates are validated. Importantly, however, even in cases when a job candidate performs in ways that disconfirm employers' first impressions, employers may fail to assess the candidate's performance accurately, preventing them from

changing their first impressions accordingly. Research has shown that this might be due to high levels of self-regulation on behalf of the interviewers (Nordstrom, Hall, & Bartels, 1998). Therefore, reducing cognitive demands in an interview context by using scripted questions or having third-party observers evaluate the interview process might be effective in fostering accurate impressions and judgments of a job candidate.

When forming first impressions, people typically have to rely on limited and potentially misleading information about others. Drawing big conclusions from such limited information can lead to poor decisions with broader implications. Understanding the origins and consequences of first impressions is the first step to addressing biases in those impressions. The points discussed above aim to provide a brief guide to the students of psychological science who are interested in taking part in this scientific journey.

## References

Ambady, N., & Rosenthal, R. (1993). Half a minute: Predicting teacher evaluations from thin slices of nonverbal behavior and physical attractiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 431–441.

Barrick, M. R., Swider, B. W., & Stewart, G. L. (2010). Initial evaluations in the interview: Relationships with subsequent interviewer evaluations and employment offers. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 95*, 1163–1172. doi:10.1037/a0019918

Blascovich, J., Mendes, W. B., Hunter, S. B., Lickel, B., & Kowai-Bell, N. (2001). Perceiver threat in social interactions with stigmatized others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80*, 253–267.

Chen, S., Shechter, D., & Chaiken, S. (1996). Getting at the truth or getting along: Accuracy-versus impression-motivated heuristic and systematic processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 262–275.

Dougherty, T. W., Ebert, R. J., & Callender, J. C. (1986). Policy capturing in the employment interview. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *71*, 9–15.

Dougherty, T. W., Turban, D. B., & Callender, J. C. (1994). Confirming first impressions in the employment interview: A field study of interviewer behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *79*, 659–665.

Gosling, S. D., Ko, S. J., Mannarelli, T., & Morris, M. E. (2002). A room with a cue: Personality judgments based on offices and bedrooms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 379–398.

Gregg, A. P., Seibt, B., & Banaji, M. R. (2006). Easier done than undone: Asymmetry in the malleability of implicit preferences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*, 1–20.

Gunaydin, G., Selcuk, E., & Zayas, V. (2017). Impressions based on a portrait predict, 1-month later, impressions following a live interaction. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *8*, 36–44.

Harris, M. J., & Garris, C. P. (2008). You never get a second chance to make a first impression:

Behavioral consequences of first impressions. In N. Ambady & J. J. Skowronski (Eds.), *First impressions* (pp. 147–168). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Higgins, E.T., Rholes, W.S., & Jones, C.R. (1977). Category accessibility and impression formation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 13*, 141–154.

Mann, T. C., & Ferguson, M. J. (2015). Can we undo our first impressions? The role of reinterpretation in reversing implicit evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108*, 823–849.

Moskowitz, G. B. (1993). Individual differences in social categorization: The effects of personal need for structure on spontaneous trait inferences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 132–142.

Moskowitz, G. B., & Olcaysoy Okten, I. (2016). Spontaneous goal inference (SGI). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *10*, 64–80.

Nordstrom, C. R., Hall, R. J., & Bartels, L. K. (1998). First impressions versus good impressions: The effect of self-regulation on interview evaluations. *The Journal of Psychology*, *132*, 477–491.

Olcaysoy Okten, I., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2017a). How ideology shapes implicit inference: Spontaneous goal inference versus spontaneous trait inference. Manuscript invited for revision and resubmission.

Olcaysoy Okten, I., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2017b). Updating spontaneous trait inferences. Manuscript in preparation.

Olcaysoy Okten, I., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2018). Goal versus trait explanations: Causal attributions beyond the trait-situation dichotomy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. doi:10.1037/pspa0000104

Payne, B. K., Burkley, M. A., & Stokes, M. B. (2008). Why do implicit and explicit attitude tests diverge? The role of structural fit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*, 16–31.

Peck, B. M., & Denney, M. (2012). Disparities in the conduct of the medical encounter: The effects of physician and patient race and gender. *Sage Open*, *2*. doi:10.1177/2158244012459193

Rydell, R. J., & McConnell, A. R. (2006). Understanding implicit and explicit attitude change: A systems of reasoning analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *91*, 995–1008.

Snyder, M., & Swann, W. B. (1978). Hypothesis-testing processes in social interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *36*, 1202–1212.

Snyder, M., Tanke, E. D., & Berscheid, E. (1977). Social perception and interpersonal behavior: On the self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and social Psychology*, *35*, 656–666.

Swider, B. W., Barrick, M. R., & Harris, T. B. (2016). Initial impressions: What they are, what they are not, and how they influence structured interview outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *101*,

625–638.

Uleman, J. S., Blader, S., & Todorov, A. (2005). Implicit impressions. In R. Hassin, J. S. Uleman, & J. A. Bargh (Eds.), *The new unconscious* (pp. 362–392). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Willis, J., & Todorov, A. (2006). First impressions: Making up your mind after a 100-ms exposure to a face. *Psychological Science*, *17*, 592–598.

Wyer, N. A. (2016). Easier done than undone…by some of the people, some of the time: The role of elaboration in explicit and implicit group preferences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *63*, 77–85.