

The Impact of Perceived Intelligence and Social Class on Impression Formation

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Impression formation is the process of making initial judgments of others based on limited information. Impression formation leads to the use of stereotypes and over-generalizations. Our study looked at the effect of impression formation by comparing differences in perceptions about two key variables: educational status and socioeconomic status (SES). One hundred seventy-five undergraduate students read a scenario about a target and evaluated their perception of that target by means of a questionnaire. In general, we expected that participants would rate a target as being more intelligent, motivated, capable, and responsible when the target was described as being of higher educational status than of lower educational status, and of higher socioeconomic status rather than lower socioeconomic status. The central hypotheses were not supported. However, participants rated a target of higher SES to be more intelligent and more likely to succeed once readmitted into school than participants of lower SES.

People are quick to evaluate and form perceptions of others within seconds of meeting them. One major goal of human cognition is to come to the fastest judgment possible using the least cognitive effort (Nelson, 2002). Initial inferences are drawn based on the knowledge one has of the individual. If little is known about the individual, impressions will rely on stereotypes that are frequently exaggerated and often invalid. For example, knowledge of one's academic status may lead to inferences about their character as a person and their ability in non-related areas including group interaction, reliability, and efficiency (McAninch & Milich, 1996). These preconceived notions are reinforced in the assessment of the target's behavior and also the future behavior of the perceiver toward the target.

Impression formation is defined as the process of making initial judgments of others based on limited information. These judgments help guide our expectations regarding subsequent social interactions and behavior (Berrenberg, 1987). Previous research in the field of impression formation has found several conclusive themes regarding inferences and expectancies as they relate to impression formation. For instance, McAninch and Milich (1996) assigned a task to pairs of children age seven to 12. One child was led to believe that their partner was either "smart" or "not smart". Observers noted the interactions between the children. After the task was completed, the participants filled out a questionnaire reporting their impression of their partner's work. The results suggested that the belief that one's partner was either "smart" or "not smart" affected the participant's perception of the partner. Participants who believed their partner was "smart" rated their partner as smarter and the task as easier than the participants who believed their partner was "not smart". Further, participants who were led to believe that their partner was "smart" asked more questions, were more agreeable with their partner, and deferred more to their partner than if they were led to believe their partner was "not smart." If led to believe their partner was "not smart," participants took more control in the task and were the more dominant of the two.

The results found by McAninch and Milich (1996) illustrate that the perception of intelligence can weigh heavily upon impression formation. Not only does the intelligence label affect one's opinion of others, but it can also influence their behavior towards others. Perceivers often over-generalize initial impressions of intelligence to apply to other characteristics. In addition, people may assume other characteristics are representative of intelligence. For instance, people may assume that level of education, physical attractiveness, type of dress, and/or speech patterns represent the individual's actual intelligence level. In college environments, the type of school a student attends is often seen as indicative of intelligence. Students attending an Ivy League school are seen as smarter than those attending a public school. In particular, people who attend a four-year institution are perceived as smarter than people who attend a two-year institution. As stated by Townsend & LaPaglia (2000), community colleges are held in low regard among the academic community and on the margins of higher education. Despite the fact that admissions standards can and do vary across types of schools, perceivers are likely to over-generalize the meaning of school choice to basic levels of intelligence.

Socioeconomic status is another factor that can influence impression formation. Lott and Saxon (2002) had participants read descriptions of women and then rated their impression of her as well as how likely they would be to elect that woman to the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). The researchers varied the women's social class and ethnicity. Participants judged working class women as "cruder" and "more irresponsible" than middle class women. Working class women were also "elected" fewer times to the position in the PTO and rated as "less strident, meeker, and less perfectionist" (Lott & Saxon, 2002).

Kunz (2000) investigated the response rate to Christmas cards dependent upon perceived socioeconomic status of the sender. She wanted to find if the perceived socio-economic status of the sender would affect the rate of response to the card on the part of the receiver. The Christmas cards were either implied to be from a high economic status sender (a return address with the title Dr. in front of the name) or low economic status (no Dr. in front of the name). The quality of Christmas card was also varied. The dependent variable was the number of responses received from the cards. Not surprisingly, Kunz found that 78% of those who had received a high socioeconomic status card replied with either a Christmas card or phone call as compared to the 22% response rate from those who had received a low status card.

These studies demonstrate the effects of status perception upon impression formation. In these studies, participants changed their impression towards the individual after learning information about various aspects of that person. After an impression was formed, a change in behavior soon followed. Participants decided what course of action they would take based on the few details they had obtained about the individual.

Meeting new people is an inevitable part of life. Therefore, it is important to understand the inaccuracies of quickly forming impressions of others. In absence of real knowledge about academic and socioeconomic status, people will rely on stereotypes when making judgments about another person. In our study, we predict that people who attend a two-year institution will be perceived as less intelligent, less motivated, and not as responsible as people who attend a four-year institution. Additionally, people who are thought to be of lower socioeconomic status will be perceived as less resourceful and less capable of succeeding than people of higher socioeconomic status. Finally, we expect a behavior toward the target to change based on the individual's perceived intelligence and social class.

METHODS

This study tested 175 students, 133 women and 42 men, in undergraduate psychology courses (M age = 19.73, SD = 1.56). The sample was largely Caucasian (96.60%) followed by Native American (1.1%), and Hispanic, African American, Asian/Pacific, and "Other" (.6% each). The majority of the sample was sophomores (68.0%), followed by juniors (16.0%), freshman (9.1%), and finally seniors (6.9%). Most of the participants were education majors. We excluded participants who had previously attended a technical college or were on academic probation. Students received extra credit for participating in the study. We obtained informed consent prior to the start of the study. We gave participants a scenario which described a realistic situation about a student who has been dismissed from school. We asked participants to read and respond to several questions regarding the scenario. The independent variables in the scenario were socioeconomic status (parents working as janitors at a hospital vs. parents working as doctors) and school choice (students attending Western Wisconsin Technical College (WWTC) vs. students attending University of Wisconsin La Crosse (UWL)). One scenario described the person as attending WWTC and having parents who work third shift as janitors in a hospital, another portrayed the person as going to WWTC and having parents who both are doctors, a third scenario described the person as attending UWL and having parents who work third shift as janitors in a hospital, and a final scenario described the person as attending UWL and having both parents work as doctors (See Figure 1). After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of the person described in the scenario. In particular, participants rated the person in terms of perceived intelligence, motivation, responsibility, resourcefulness, and capability on a Likert-based scale. Finally, in order to assess potential behavior toward a target, participants rated how likely they would be to allow that student to re-enter school after they had been dismissed and how successful the target would be if she re-entered.

RESULTS

We ran an ANOVA analysis to explore our primary hypothesis that people who attend a two-year institution will be perceived as less intelligent, less motivated, and not as responsible as people who attend a four-year institution. In general, our hypothesis was not supported. For example, there was no significant difference in

perceived motivation between lower SES and higher SES. However, holding gender constant, we did find that SES was related to perceived intelligence. Participants rated the student with doctor parents as more intelligent ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.32$) than the student with janitor parents ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.08$), [$F(1, 167) = 4.45, p = .04$]. There was no significant difference based on SES for whether or not participants would allow the person in the scenario back into school. However, there was a main effect of SES on appraisals of success while controlling for gender. Participants were seen as being more likely to succeed in school with parents who were doctors ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.10$) than were those with parents who were janitors ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.00$), [$F(1, 167) = 6.85, p = .01$] where one is highly successful and seven is not at all successful.

DISCUSSION

Our hypotheses, that people who attend a two-year institution will be perceived as less intelligent, less motivated, and not as responsible as people who attend a four-year institution and that people who are thought to be of lower socioeconomic status will be perceived as less resourceful and less capable of succeeding than people of higher socioeconomic status, were not supported in this study. However, there were interesting findings regarding differences in perceptions of individuals based on their SES. Participants rated a target of higher SES to be more intelligent and more likely to succeed once readmitted into school than participants of lower SES. This could be due to the fact that participants may perceive SES to be a more innate characteristic of an individual rather than a behavioral characteristic, such as one's choice of school. In other words, the SES of the target was seen as more permanent and inherent than simply selecting a school to attend. SES is a characteristic that the target had no choice over and has lived with her whole life, thus it would have a larger influence on the target.

Although our hypotheses were not supported, our results can be seen as positive in terms of the role of impression formation on later perceptions. In other words, we may have overestimated the impact of one's level of perceived SES and intelligence on other characteristics ascribed to them. These characteristics may not be of as great importance than previously thought – at least for our college student participants. Further investigation is needed to determine if SES and intelligence levels actually affect impression formation.

In future research, it would be beneficial to differentiate more between the two schools. It is possible that the differences in the ascribed characteristics would become more apparent with a larger “intelligence gap”. For example, rather than using a two-year and four-year institution, significant results may be found by using a two-year institution and an Ivy league school such as Harvard. A larger differentiation between the target's school may lead to interesting findings regarding impression formation related to one's perceived SES and academic status.

Sample Scenario:

Kate is a 19 year old college student attending the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Kate has parents who both work as doctors at a hospital in her hometown of Milwaukee, WI. Kate works out regularly and enjoys playing sports. She also enjoys taking her dog, Max, on walks. Kate has many friends and likes to go out on weekends. After Kate's first semester, she was placed on academic probation. Last semester, Kate was dismissed from school on account of her poor grades. She is now working as a waitress in order to save money and continue school. She is hoping to re-enter UW-L next semester.

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