

# Forming an impression of a personality:

## A comparison

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The purpose of the study by Asch (1946) was to investigate the processes involved in forming an impression of a person from a number of written traits. People, the author affirms, make unified impressions of others very rapidly, effortlessly, from only several discrete pieces of information and without a deliberate use of memory. They propose two main theoretical models to account for this process. According to model 1, overall impression is formed from a simple sum of individual impressions (in this case, traits), and there are several variations of this model. However, model 2, consistent with Gestalt theory, states that we perceive the individual traits in relation to each other and form the unified impression as an interconnected structure.

The study comprises of 10 experiments in 4 sections in total with somewhat different procedures and aims. Generally, a number of subjects (ranging from 20 to 90 in one group) were given a short (<10) list of trait words describing a personality, and they were subsequently asked to check which of a different list of given traits probably characterised that person.

The author concludes that the overall results support only the model 2, and not any of variations of the model 1. Specifically, that subject tended to form the impression as an integrated, non-contradictory structure, in which the meaning of every trait is specified by its position in it and it conversly has the potential to change the meaning of any other trait. The main limitations of the study might be the absence of systematic analysis of open-ended answers and too high variance in traits centrality-rating. Also, the results may not generalize to actual lived experience with persons.

Many later studies cite the study by Asch as the first evidence for so-called primacy-of-warmth effect (PWE) - the notion that warmth-related information has primacy over competence-related information in impression formation, an issue addressed by the second study (Nauts et al., 2017). They point out that neither does this effect follow directly from his data, nor does it fit to his Gestalt framework for impression formation. For these reasons, they replicated the first section (4 experiments) of the study with some methodological differences.

Compared to laboratory setting and a different group of subjects for each experiment in the original study, authors administered the study to a higher number (1023) of subjects online through MTurk and assigned them randomly to 7 experimental conditions. In all 4 experiments in both studies, the subjects were given a list of 7 traits, then were asked to write a brief sketch of that person, and finally were given a longer list of trait-pairs and were asked to check a trait from each pair that most fitted the person. The participants also ranked the 7 traits in terms of centrality.

In the first, resp. third, experiment, subjects were given one of two lists differing only in one word (warm/cold, resp. polite/blunt). In the second experiment, the

dimension warm/cold was omitted, and in the last one, the centrality of the dimension *warm/cold* was attempted to manipulate by changing the traits in the initial list.

In addition to the former, **the present study** statistically analysed the ranking and trait-pair choice data and textual analysis of the open-ended data for valence and warmth-index (difference in the number of warmth-related and competence-related words). In contrast to *warm*, resp. *cold* being one of the central traits (as inferred from the rankings) in the original study, they were found to be of very little or the least importance in the present study. Neither ranking nor open-ended data provided evidence for the PWE in any of the experiments, which is consistent with the former study conclusion that the centrality of a trait is context-specific. However, the warm-cold dimension in the initial list was found in the present study to have a stronger influence on the valence of open-ended texts than polite-blunt dimension, consistently with the former study.

Apart from PWE-focused analysis, the present study analysed the data of all 10 experiments from the original study and found support for the Asch's conclusion that the subject form a unified impression going far beyond the original description.

**The authors conclude that no primacy-of-warmth effect was found in either of the two studies.** But more importantly, Asch did not advocate for PWE, rather, he suggested a Gestalt-view on impression formation, which has undeservedly gone into background in contemporary research, as authors reflect. They furthermore suggest this view to draw more attention as a framework for contemporary research on impression formation.

I agree with the authors that primacy-of-warmth effect does not follow from results of the study by Asch, furthermore, I think it is in direct contradiction with it, since he emphasized that a centrality of a trait is context-specific. The warm/cold dimension might strongly influence the valence of the impression, but it would be the same case with any other competence-related highly evaluative trait word, I believe.

## References

Asch, S. E. (1946). Forming impressions of personality. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41(3), 258–290. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0055756>

Nauts, S., Langner, O., Huijsmans, I., Vonk, R., & Wigboldus, D. H. J. (2014). Forming Impressions of Personality. *Social Psychology*, 45(3), 153–163.

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Práce pro mne byla hůře čitelná, ačkoli formálně splňuje zadání a při druhém čtení se mi líbila více. Je poskytnuto důkladné shrnutí obou studií. Porovnání je také možné v práci nalézt, ale není natolik systematizované, jak bych doufal. Text přeskakuje s různými po sobě jdoucími odstavci mezi shrnujícími a srovnávajícími pasážemi, ale ne periodicky. Formátování – zarovnal bych do bloku. Pro zvýšení srozumitelnosti doporučuji uvádět osoby, které parafrázujete v rámci referencí v textu. Vlastní závěry se zabývají pouze jednou částí srovnání obou studií. Ocenil bych zde malinko více interpretace, např. co dané rozdíly mezi studii pro výsledky znamenají.

Ať se daří,

Adam Klocek