

FORMING IMPRESSIONS OF PERSONALITY: A CRITIQUE

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GESTALT theory—rooted in logic and epistemology, and with its experimental foundations in the psychology of perception, learning and thinking—was regarded by its founder, the late Max Wertheimer, as equally applicable to problems of personality and of the social field (2, 3). Recently, an associate of Wertheimer, S. E. Asch, reported on an experimental investigation of a complex personal and social phenomenon: the formation of impressions of personality (1). The present writer, also associated with Wertheimer for many years, looked forward to this report, interested in seeing how a Gestaltist would approach this phenomenon, what method he would employ to capture its essential nature and yet make it amenable to experimental investigation. It was found that the procedure consisted of reading to groups of subjects a list of trait-names said to denote characteristics belonging to a particular person, asking them to form an impression of this person, and then to give a brief characterization in a few sentences; to simplify the determination of the content of the written impressions and for group comparisons, each subject was then given a check list consisting of pairs of trait-names, mostly opposites, and was asked to select from each pair the one which best accorded with the view he had formed. Numerous variations utilized different lists, various arrangements of the words in a particular list, and additions to or deletions from these words. How does this method fulfill the Gestalt principle of being guided in the construction of the experimental design by the "concrete nature" of the things studied (2, p. 3)?

For the living, organized person who is the object of judgment, the study substituted a handful of words, discrete trait-names (or, to stretch the point considerably, discrete traits), which were to be organized to form an impression; for the varied interpersonal, social relationships between observer and observed, out of which grows the impression, an assignment to write a description based on these words; for the dynamic, changing time-space manifold in which the impression forms and grows, the narrow experimental situation; and for the vivid impressions of personality which often result in daily life, impressions which Asch himself has dubbed as weak and incipient (1, p. 261). Does the investigation perhaps not warrant the very criticism which Wertheimer directed against some psychological studies—that they exclude that which is most vivid and real in the living phenomenon, that they somehow lose the very thing which matters (2, p. 1)?

Ease of experimental investigation and manipulation appears to be one reason for the choice of the described procedure (p. 261).¹ Perhaps the formulations of the problem can hint at further rationale. The report states:

1. Each person confronts us with a large number of diverse characteristics. . . . How do the several characteristics function together to produce an impression of one person? (p. 258)

2. . . . our view of a person necessarily involves a certain orientation to, and ordering of, objectively given, observable characteristics. It is this aspect of the problem that we propose to study (p. 260).

¹ Henceforth all page numbers will refer to the report by Asch.

Parenthetically, we mention that such terms as *characteristics*, *traits*, and *character-qualities*, basal to these formulations and to the entire report, are not precisely defined. It is not always clear whether characteristics referred to in the text are those which an individual consistently possesses, or those which he expresses in a particular situation, or, finally, those which an observer attributes to him. While the three are not always related in a one-to-one manner, distinctions among them are not drawn in the text, but rather there appears to be an implicit assumption that, for traits, possession is directly equivalent to impression.²

Underlying the experimental design and the two quoted formulations of the problem, there seems to lurk the hypothesis that impressions of personality involve "orientation to" (p. 260) and integration of discrete traits. But in judgments of actual people the observer need not necessarily perceive diverse characteristics. Unlike what occurred in the experiments, his impression of a person may form before he is aware of distinct characteristics and need not be the result of organizing these. The discovery of traits, if it does occur, may be the outcome of differentiation from behavior patterns, influenced by—and in turn influencing—the impression. While Asch was aware of the importance of the discovery of traits in a person (p. 289), he excluded this process in studying impressions of personality. It seems to us that he was thus arbitrarily separating processes which are interwoven in judgments of people.

Moreover, while Asch rightfully criti-

² Thus, in dealing with a possible theoretical explanation of the process of forming an impression (one to which his study does not subscribe), Asch equated the total impression of the person to the sum of possessed traits, as well as to the sum of impressions of the individual traits (pp. 258-259).

cized many investigations of impressions of personality for a one-sided stress on subjective influences (p. 260), his own study strikes us as being one-sided in its neglect of personal and social factors, particularly since it was not established that what he studied could be dealt with independently of such factors.

Indeed, he appears to believe that the processes he investigated are quite general in nature. Thus, he explained that the issue of individual differences was not taken into account because "it seemed desirable to turn first to those processes which hold generally despite individual differences" (p. 283). But it was not established that the studied processes hold generally: that they represent a universal phenomenon, are present in all cases of impressions of actual persons, or typify a pure case of such impressions.

Furthermore, he maintained that the impressions resulting from these lists of trait-names are "partial aspects of a broader process" involved in natural judgments of people (p. 289). A priori, there is little justification for such an assumption. Neither experimentally nor empirically was the transition made from his experimental situations to life situations, from trait-names to human actions; nowhere in the report was there shown the relevancy of the experimental procedures to more natural judgments.

But even if it is granted that the impressions dealt with are partial aspects of a broader process involved in impressions of actual people, it does not follow that the characteristics of the studied aspects are necessarily contained in the broader process. One need not share the investigator's belief that while observations of actual persons probably would "involve other processes which we have failed to find under the present conditions . . . we see *no reason to doubt*

that the basic features we were able to observe are also present in the judgment of actual persons" (p. 283, italics ours). Features of partial aspects or parts need not characterize the picture of the total process; the latter may not be at all determinable from what takes place in some aspects of it. It would have been of value if Asch had described how the impressions he studied are related to impressions of actual people; precisely what are those "basic features" to which he refers and what role they play in more natural judgments; and how one who desired to understand the latter might hope to take into account the many aspects and factors neglected by the study.

CRITIQUE OF SPECIFIC CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Each of the more than 1000 subjects who participated in the various experiments submitted a written sketch of a person, which was described by Asch as being unified, completed, and rounded (p. 261). Since there was no one person nor one standard sketch with which to compare the diversified expositions resulting from the reading of any one list, we wonder how he determined that a sketch was completed, that there was nothing lacking; or that it was unified; or that it was rounded. Clarification concerning the basis for the application of these adjectives to all the sketches is of importance, since many of the report's conclusions and implications are largely founded upon the alleged character of the sketches.

In describing the main points in the procedure of his subjects, the investigator stated:

There is an attempt to form an impression of the *entire* person. The subject can see the person only as a unit; he cannot form an impression of one-half or of one-quarter of the person. . . . The subject seeks to reach

the core of the person *through* the trait or traits. (p. 284)

One notices that these statements were worded as though an impression of an actual person was involved. This was done "for the sake of convenience of expression" (p. 283). Why should these formulations have been couched in the language of impressions of actual people, when the impressions with which the investigation dealt are not necessarily related to natural judgments?

The matter of language aside, we wish that it had been stated explicitly whether these formulations were based on his subjects' procedures as revealed through analysis of the written sketches and/or check lists, or whether they were based on private information submitted by his subjects and not described in the text. We fail to see how the sketches or check lists reveal an attempt to see the "entire person." Again, since there was no one person nor one standard sketch with which to compare the sketches, how did Asch determine that the entire person, and not one-half or one-quarter, was seen and described? Secondly, how did he deduce that there was a search for the "core" of the person? He mentioned that diversified accounts resulted from the reading of any list (p. 261). In anticipation of a subsequent section, we report that, when we repeated one of the experiments, diversified sketches also were obtained. One of our classes, for example, submitted sketches containing such opposing views as these:

1a. This person is able to lead others

1b. I don't think a person like this is a capable leader

2a. selfish, concealed individual

2b. not inclined to be selfish

3a. He should be of a very likeable nature

3b. Obvious that such a person would not be very likeable

Which of these comes closer to the core of the person? To say that each participant searched for the core of the particular person he wrote about is to beg the issue, unless his subjects mentioned such strivings. Ours did not.

The above quoted description of his subjects' procedures was continued in the following manner:

As soon as two or more traits are understood to belong to one person, they cease to exist as isolated traits,³ and come into immediate dynamic interaction. . . . There takes place a process of organization in the course of which the traits order themselves into a structure. It may be said that the traits lead an intensely social life, striving to join each other in a closely organized system. . . . The whole system of relations determines which (traits) will become central. (p. 284)

We fail to see how the results could indicate sociability and eagerness for common group-membership among the traits, or that the system of traits orders its own structure and determines the central or peripheral character of its members.

Finally, Asch concluded from the experiments that formation and change of impressions of personality "consist of specific processes of organization" (p. 285), and that the impression itself is not an and-summation of impressions, but is itself structured (p. 287). He implied that structural features are involved in the organization of traits within the personality (p. 286). While we are in theoretical sympathy with the content of these conclusions and implications, and while we believe that subsequent experimentation may attest to their validity, it is our opinion that they were drawn from experiments which had little relationship to actual

impressions of personality, and that it was not clearly established how they logically follow from the results. The results do attest to the Gestalt hypothesis that, when a proper frame of reference is adopted, certain items of experience tend to be viewed as an organized whole, the items in this case being the trait-names, and the frame of reference the directions that the words denote characteristics of one person and that the task is to characterize the person in sentence form. The experimental variations support the Gestalt thesis that an item is what it is because of its role and function in its field. But these theses might also have found support if other words, not trait-names, had been employed and the subjects told that they referred, say, to a certain scene or a certain event. Certainly one would not draw from such experiments conclusions and implications for actual personality structure, or formation and change of impressions of personality. To do so from Asch's study—which dealt essentially with the organization of words into a description of a person—may be almost as unwarranted.

REPETITION OF EXPERIMENT

In order to gain understanding of what takes place when such an experimental setup is administered, we repeated one of Asch's experiments.⁴ The instructions we employed were precisely those described in the report and the list of trait-names was one quoted in the report: *energetic—assured—talkative—cold—ironical—inquisitive—persuasive* (p. 260). Yet, our results differed sharply from those Asch found.

Each of his subjects submitted a unified description of a person, which was not discrete, but in which the separate

³ In actual life situations, when does one meet two isolated traits and then realize that they belong to one person?

⁴ We did not employ the check list since we were primarily interested in the sketches themselves.

qualities mentioned in the list had been shaped into a single consistent view; each account was "completed and rounded" (p. 261). But we found that of 40 Yeshiva University students, comprising two history classes, and of 29 students in an elementary psychology class in Brooklyn College (the latter similar to the psychology classes used in the original investigation) only 19 and 15, respectively, submitted descriptive sketches of an individual. Even several of these responses do not give evidence of a consistent viewpoint and it would be far-fetched to say of most of them that they were unified, completed and rounded. Moreover, while his subjects did not reproduce the given list or reply merely with synonyms (p. 261), over one-third of our sketches consisted, in the main, of words from the list, or synonyms strung together in sentence form, e.g., illustration (a) below, while a few others were essentially collections of definitions of the terms.

Our remaining subjects contributed a wide array of responses. Of those in the history classes, three gave globular or general impressions, e.g., (b) below; four gave discrete value-judgments of the discrete characteristics, e.g., (c) and (d); six wrote about a profession or type, rather than of any particular individual, e.g., (e); four concentrated on inconsistencies among the traits, e.g., (f); and four stated that they could not respond to the task or submitted blank sheets. Of the remaining psychology students, five dealt with a profession or a type; five described one or more psychological mechanisms or experiences which might account for possession of the traits, e.g., (g); three dealt only with incompatibilities among the traits; and one stated that he did not know how to proceed. It is interesting to note that Asch made no mention of failures to respond, that he stressed

that the process his subjects employed was not the forming of a homogeneous, "general impression" (p. 285), and that, while he referred to contradictions among traits when other lists were used, he did not mention that any of the subjects who heard the list employed herein were troubled by or even mentioned inconsistencies.

The replies submitted by our subjects, referred to in the text, were the following:

(a) This person appears to be of a very *talkative* nature, though very *cold*, but is *assured* while being *energetic*. He has a very *ironic* viewpoint and is exceedingly *persuasive* in his arguments. (Italics ours. Note similarity between italicized words and the words in the list read to the subject.)

(b) This description doesn't characterize to me a person of too good a character. . . .

(c) He or she is energetic and persuasive which are good signs, but to be ironical, cold, and talkative usually is harmful. Therefore, most of these traits are not good.

(d) I would like him for his energy and inquisitiveness and dislike him for his talkativeness, irony and coldness. I am indifferent to persuasiveness.

(e) This description could be fitted to detectives. . . .

(f) No one person could have all these characteristics. . . .

(g) This individual must have a superiority complex since he is assured, talkative, cold, and persuasive. He must also have had several bad experiences, shown by being ironical.

This difference in results is particularly challenging in view of Asch's "preliminary" generalization that "when a task of this kind is given, a normal adult is capable of responding to the instruction by forming a unified impression" (p. 261). Either our subjects were not "normal" adults, or his assertion bears reinvestigation.

(It might not be out of place to mention here that when, in other college classes, we changed the instructions by not stating that the words denoted char-

acteristics of one person, many of the resulting impressions dealt with more than one person, or even with non-human objects, and some were discrete in nature. This trend was even more marked when subjects were not directed to write their impressions in sentence form. Only 5 out of 57 subjects then wrote a sketch of one person, while there resulted such "un-unified" responses as these: "energetic—atomic energy; ironical—life, Gulliver's travels; cold—a cold girl, I can't remember the rest," and "philosopher — nag — ice — woman—historian—age of reason,"—results which hint that the particular instructions Asch employed may have given his subjects a frame of reference with which to view and organize the words.)

In an attempt to understand our subjects' procedures, we questioned them at the end of the experimental session. Over two-thirds of them stated that they did not base their impressions on all of the words of the list, but only on a select few; we wonder whether the reference to the shaping of the separate qualities into a single, consistent view (p. 261) was intended to imply that all of the characteristics were taken into account by the participants in the original investigation. Over three-fourths of our subjects testified that they did not actually conceive of one person. They said that no one person could have all these characteristics, that they thought of a type rather than of an individual, that they concentrated on the discrete items, and that the list called nothing to their minds. The procedures which our subjects claimed to have used in forming their impressions included the following:

I regarded it as the writing of an essay or composition using these words, but I didn't really have an impression of a person.

I thought of each characteristic and expressed my thoughts on it.

I had a vague, general idea and tried to put it into words.

Some of the words reminded me of a certain person so I wrote about him. I left out words of the list that did not fit him and used additional ones.

The list immediately brought to mind a person and the sketch almost wrote itself.

Unfortunately, little information is given to indicate what replies Asch's subjects might have given to similar questions. Such data might have thrown some light on the reasons for the differences in results. We believe that the reasons may be found to lie in personal and social factors, factors neglected in the original investigation.

OUR EXPLORATORY EXPERIMENTS

We have conducted some preliminary investigations on the formation of impressions of personality—mainly on the phenomenological level—a brief account of which may be in place in the present report.⁵ The study of impressions based on observations, which thus far involves about 200 subjects, included comparison of written and spoken impressions, first and later impressions of one person (in one experiment these were separated by six months, and in another, by 11 years between preadolescence and postadolescence), and various persons' impressions of a certain individual, e.g., his sweetheart, brother, teacher, employer. Secondly, subjects who had submitted their descriptions of an individual were asked to think of and to list the traits he possessed, and then they were again requested to write their impression of the person. Thirdly, throughout the course of a semester, one detailed life history was read to various psychology classes, but was interrupted at different por-

⁵ We hope to publish a more detailed account in the near future.

tions in the different classes, as well as introduced with varying explanations concerning the present status of the individual described; after each portion and at the conclusion of the history the listeners were asked to write their impressions of the person. Finally, several sketches of behavior manifested by one person at various times and places were read to subjects who were asked to write their impressions after each sketch and after all of them had been read.

Tentative conclusions from these experiments, which have bearing on Asch's report, are the following:

1. Written expression of the impression may not be isomorphically related to the latter. Because of the writer's inability to express himself, the written exposition may consist of discrete items while the impression, as revealed through interviews, appears to be well organized; conversely, ability to write a unified composition may belie the hazy or unorganized character of an impression. Asch does not seem to distinguish between the written description and the actual impression.

2. Formation of impressions often involves the organizational processes stressed by Asch, but also such processes as accentuation, change, addition, or omission of details in the direction set by certain stereotypes, conventions, or needs of the observer.

3. The nature of the resulting impression is determined by features of the judged personality and by the manner and order in which these features are revealed, as well as by the observer's attitudes, stereotypes, and mental sets concerning the observed, his needs, the relationship between the two individuals, the role each plays in the judgment situation, and by the social atmosphere. Whether the impression is determined largely by intrinsic factors in the judged

personality or by external subjective factors appears to depend to an extent on whether the judged individual is central or peripheral in the judgment field, whether he is used as evidence on which to base and check the impression.⁶ The training and ability of the observer to judge people is another determining factor. Once the impression is formed it may strongly resist change, even if it is not isomorphically related to the judged, provided it gives the observer a satisfactory explanation of the other's behavior.

4. The personality itself is structured, but not necessarily in the same sense as is a mathematical problem with a unique solution; rather, it is often akin to an ambiguous stimulus field, e.g., a complex drawing, which permits various rearrangements and reorganizations of its parts. It may possess various facets each of which, in a particular setting and for a particular observer, may become the anchorage point about which the personality is organized. Moreover, the personality plays a role in determining how much of it and what aspect of it will be observed, and is not static but interacts with the observer and the social situation.

5. That the personality is described as ambiguous is not to be taken to mean that it is neutral, that it permits any arbitrary arrangement of its parts—but, rather, that it supports a certain range of structurizations. These may differ in their degree of structural clarity and stability. Again, ambiguity does not imply that subjective factors will necessarily play the prominent role in deter-

⁶ The problem of the role of evidence in judgment and perception in social situations has been discussed in previous reports by the writer: On agreement with another's judgment, *This JOURNAL*, 1944, 39, 97-111; Social influences on perception of complex drawings, *J. soc. Psychol.*, 1945, 21, 257-273; A conflict in norms; metric versus English units of linear measurement, *J. soc. Psychol.*, 1947, 25, 193-206.

mining the resulting structurization of the personality and the impression.

That the range of ambiguity and degree of structural clarity vary for different personality structures may help to explain why several observers (each of whom may feel that he has reached the "center" of the judged personality) may show striking disagreement in describing one individual and well-nigh complete accord in describing another.

6. With regard to the matter of traits, we found that, while some of the descriptions we received mentioned distinct traits, others did not. However, after the subjects were told to note and list traits, the subsequent characterizations showed a striking increase in the use of discrete trait-names. Whether or not traits were initially discovered or attributed to the judged, and whether they were seen as central or peripheral to his makeup, seemed to depend not solely on the system of relations among traits, to which Asch refers (p. 284), but also on the complex of factors described in paragraph 3 of this section. Finally, our experiments did not reveal a process of organization "in the course of which the traits order *themselves* into a structure" (p. 284, italics ours); we found that the organization of the traits was not a self-regulating process, but was affected by the structure of the field in which the judgments took place.

One of the main implications of our

findings is the importance, in the establishment and growth of an impression of personality, of the judgment-field. Because of particular field conditions, one and not another impression may develop. The very traits which are seen in a person may themselves be products of certain field conditions. To begin with discrete traits, to take the processes involved in the formation and growth of impressions of people out of their natural milieu, and to neglect personal and social influences may achieve experimental neatness, but at the expense of understanding of everyday judgments of people. It is our belief that whenever possible the actual phenomenon should dictate the methods employed to study it. While our described preliminary procedures are admittedly cruder than those of Asch's, it is our hope that out of these phenomenological approaches there will evolve more rigorous methods of studying impressions of personality, which take into account the dynamics of the field in which the impression forms and grows.

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