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Negativity and descriptive extremity in impression formation

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INTRODUCTION

The processes whereby different items of information are integrated into a single judgment have been studied in several ways. Kanouse and Hanson's (1972) comprehensive review shows that in a variety of tasks (e.g. logical inference, risk-taking and moral reasoning) evaluatively negative stimuli take on greater weight than positive stimuli. In a more applied setting, Bolster and Springbett (1961) found that negative information is more influential than positive information in selection interviewing.

Studies of impression formation have similarly found that negative personality traits generally outweigh equally polarized positive traits in the formation of an overall impression of a stimulus person (e.g. Anderson, 1965; Wyer, 1970; Warr and Jackson, 1977). A possible explanation for this negativity bias is given by Jones and Davis (1965) who suggest that negative behaviour is more informative and hence more likely to lead to an attribution of personal characteristics to the target person. This view is based upon the assumption that people in general have a tendency to see the world in a positive way and that negative information in this predominantly positive environment is both more salient and influential. Further support for this notion is provided by Sears and Whitney (1972) and Taylor and Koivumaki (1976); results of their studies show that one generally expects people to behave in a positive way. One corollary of the Jones and Davis explanation is that inferences based on negative information should be made with greater certainty than inferences based on positive information.

In addition, this study examines the relation between *evaluative* direction and *descriptive* extremity. Peabody (1967) suggested that evaluatively negative terms tend to be used to denote more extreme positions on a descriptive continuum than positive terms, a view that is supported by recent findings of van der Pligt, Eiser and Taylor (1980). Both evaluative direction and extremity have been studied frequently, but most studies concerned with impression formation have only used some kind of evaluative response. The above relationship between negativity and descriptive extremity makes it possible to bring together the studies on negativity and extremity since it has been frequently found that

extreme information tends to be more influential in the formation of an overall impression (see e.g. Warr and Jackson, 1976).

In the present study we used a two-trait impression formation task in which all traits denoted risk-related behaviour, both evaluative and descriptive ratings were included as dependent variables. The purposes of the present study were (a) to replicate the findings concerning relative weighting in composite descriptions; and (b) to test the assumed relationships between negativity, descriptive extremity and inference certainty.

The above discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

- (a) negative traits receive a higher weight than positive traits in the formation of an overall judgment;
- (b) negative traits denote more extreme positions on the descriptive continuum than positive traits;
- (c) negative traits convey more definite information than positive traits, and therefore inferences based on negative traits are made with greater certainty.

METHOD

Procedure

Forty-seven male and female comprehensive school pupils (aged 14–15 years) served as subjects in the experiment. On the basis of a pilot study we selected 8 terms denoting various positions on the risk-taking continuum, such that the evaluative ratings of the positive and negative adjective groups were approximately equally extreme. The 8 items were: *overcautious*, *unadventurous*, *careful*, *self-controlled*, *daring*, *adventurous*, *irresponsible*, and *foolhardy*. First, evaluative and descriptive ratings were obtained for each of these 8 single trait descriptions. Second, subjects rated 8 two-trait pairs which were presented as follows: 'A person that is both ... and ...'. Ratings were in terms of two 5-point scales: a descriptive rating scale ranging from 'never takes risks' to 'always takes risks', and an evaluative scale ranging from 'very bad' to 'very good'; both scales were scored from -2 to +2. Evaluative sign of the adjectives was varied factorially in a 2 × 2 within subjects design. The 8 adjective pairs used in this study were: *foolhardy and irresponsible* and *unadventurous and overcautious* (NN); *unadventurous and careful* and *irresponsible and adventurous* (NP); *daring and foolhardy* and *self-controlled and overcautious* (PN); *adventurous and daring* and *careful and self-controlled* (PP). The abbreviations in parentheses denote the following four conditions; NN: both traits negative, NP: first trait negative, second positive, PN: first trait positive, second negative and PP: both traits positive. As the present study is not intended to test the effect of descriptive inconsistency, the paired adjectives were always consistent from a descriptive point of view (either denoting more risky, or less risky behaviour).

A further 30 subjects rated each of the 8 single-trait descriptions on a 4-point scale ranging from 'definitely would like that person' to 'definitely would not

like that person', intermediate categories were 'probably would (not) like that person'. This measure was intended to give an index of the inference certainty on the evaluative dimension for each of the 8 single-trait terms.

Table 1. Mean evaluative ratings for component traits and composite descriptions

Type of composite description	More positive trait (A)	Mean rating for	
		More negative trait (B)	Composite description (C)
PP	1.89	0.24	0.92
PN	0.94	-1.57	-0.63
NP	1.47	-1.62	-0.55
NN	-0.55	-2.55	-1.91

Scores are summed over the two adjective pairs in each condition, possible ranges of scores from -4 (extremely bad) to +4 (extremely good).

RESULTS

First it was checked whether the *evaluative* ratings of the positive and negative adjective groups were approximately equally extreme. Average extremity of the two adjective groups was 0.82 and 0.94 respectively, a nonsignificant difference. In each adjective pair it was determined individually for each subject which adjective had been rated more positively, that adjective was called A, the less positive component was called B and the composite description C. Table 1 presents the mean ratings of A, B and C in each of the four conditions. If differential weighting occurred then the composite rating should be pulled more to the B component than to the A component. This was tested by comparing the differences (C-A) and (B-C).

The difference between these values was not significant for PP descriptions ($t(46) = 0.78$, $p > 0.10$), a result consistent with earlier findings (Anderson, 1965; Hodges, 1974). Results of the two conditions in which adjectives with different evaluative signs were presented (PN and NP) clearly show that negative traits were weighted more heavily; values for (B-C) and (C-A) were 0.50 and 0.93 respectively ($t(46) = 2.73$, $p < 0.01$). However, closer inspection of these two conditions reveals that this overall effect is mainly due to the NP condition. Values for (B-C) and (C-A) in the PN condition were in the predicted direction (0.47 and 0.79) but this difference did not reach statistical significance. Values for (B-C) and (C-A) in the NP condition were 0.53 and 1.06 respectively ($t(46) = 2.58$, $p < 0.02$), showing that the composite rating was pulled more to the negative component than to the positive component. The fact that negative information was weighted more heavily in the NP condition and unreliably so in the PN condition is consistent with other findings of primacy effects in impression.

Results of the NN condition show that the composite rating was closer to the value of the B component than to the A component. Values of (C-A) and

(B-C) were 0.68 and 0.17 respectively ($t(46) = 2.68, p < 0.01$). This result is in accordance with previous findings by Anderson (1968) and Wyer (1969).

The t -tests only give information on the average effects. To show that this relationship between the more negative and the composite rating was systematic, the equation $C = (1 - \beta)A + \beta B$ was solved using regression analysis for the weights $(1 - \beta)$ and β . It was tested whether β was significantly different from 0.5. This resulted in the following equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{PP: } C &= 0.50A + 0.50B, & F(1, 46) &= 0, \text{ ns} \\ \text{PN: } C &= 0.42A + 0.58B, & F(1, 46) &= 1.15, \text{ ns} \\ \text{NP: } C &= 0.28A + 0.72B, & F(1, 46) &= 11.53, p < 0.001 \\ \text{NN: } C &= 0.30A + 0.70B, & F(1, 46) &= 8.94, p < 0.005 \end{aligned}$$

The above regression equations confirm our previous results and reveal that negative traits are weighted more heavily in both NP and NN descriptions.

The second hypothesis concerning the descriptive extremity of evaluatively negative traits was clearly confirmed. The average extremity (measured as the deviation from midpoint) for the negative traits was 1.31 compared to 0.79 for the positive traits ($t(46) = 3.86, p < 0.001$). Results of the composite ratings on the *descriptive* continuum confirmed the view that extreme traits are weighted more heavily. This was tested by computing the extremity of the more extreme trait (M), the less extreme trait (L) and the composite description (CD), and comparing the differences (M-CD) and (CD-L). These differences were 0.18 and 0.69 ($t(46) = 2.77, p < 0.01$), a finding that confirms previous studies on the influence of extremity (Leon, Oden and Anderson, 1973).

Finally, the additional results on inference certainty clearly confirmed the third hypothesis. Negative traits were rated more frequently in the category 'definitely would not like that person' than were positive traits in the category 'definitely would like that person'. This was tested by comparing the number of times subjects used the extreme categories for each of the two adjective groups. Summed over the four adjectives in each group, the means for the positive and negative groups were 1.03 and 1.67, a significant difference ($t(29) = 2.79, p < 0.01$). This result indicates that on the basis of negative information one is prepared to make relatively certain inferences, while positive information about a person is less likely to lead to a *certain* inference of a favourable attitude towards that person.

DISCUSSION

The present results indicate a clear effect of evaluative sign on the relative importance of component traits in the formation of evaluative judgements. Unlike previous studies (e.g. Hodges, 1974), results of this study suggest that order of presentation is of importance in the formation of an overall impression. Furthermore, the present data show that negativity is related to both inference certainty and to descriptive extremity. This combination of descriptive extremity and higher informational value of negative traits could offer an explanation for the frequently reported 'negativity bias' in the formation of overall judgments.

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