

Effective Attribution Exercises Based on Classic Research for Social Psychology Courses

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Presented at the 14th Annual Association for Psychological Science
Teaching Institute, Washington, DC, May 24, 2007

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Introduction

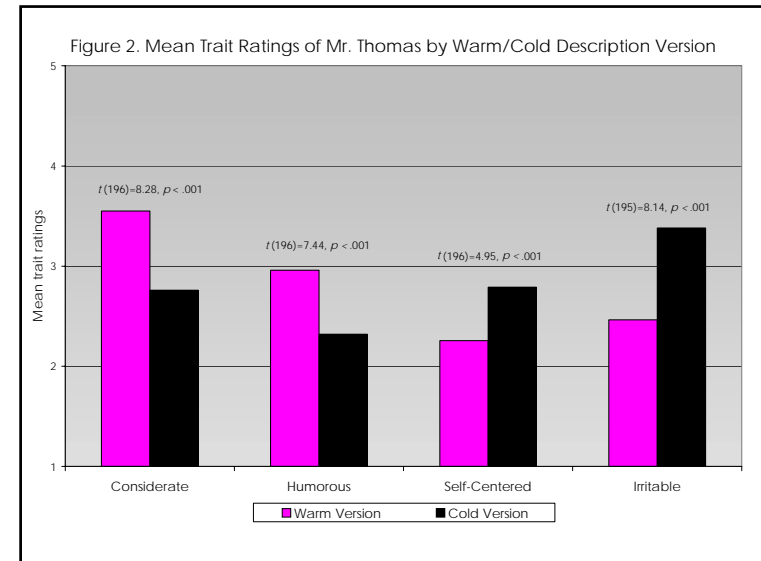
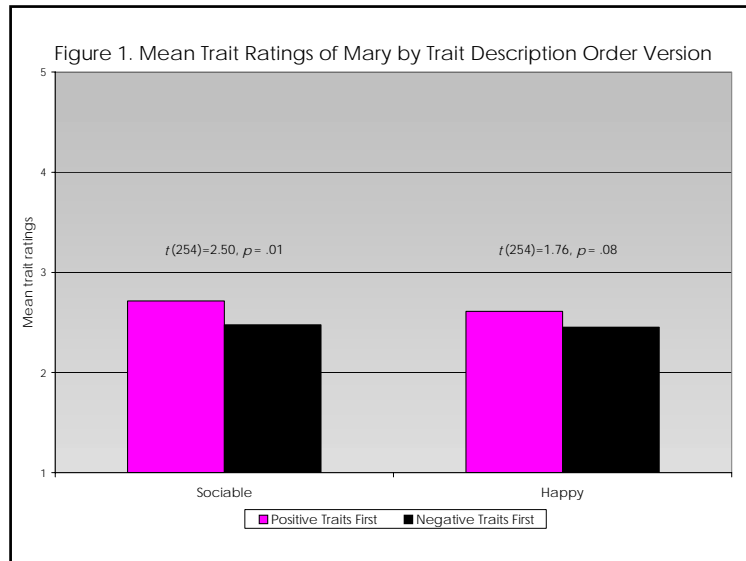
- Social perception, impression formation, attribution, and social-cognitive biases are important and essential components to most introductory social psychology courses.
- We wanted to add an interactive dimension to the teaching of Asch's (1946) primacy effect in impression formation and Kelley's (1950) *warm-cold* variable findings by replicating parts of their studies using a survey in class.

Hypothesis

- We hypothesized that students who read a description of a person with positive traits listed first would rate her as more sociable and happy than students presented with negative traits first.
- We also predicted that adding the word *warm* to a description of a person would lead to greater person perceptions of being considerate and humorous while adding the word *cold* to a description would lead to greater person perceptions of being self-centered and irritable.

Method

- Participants
256 male and female undergraduate students from nine different sections of Social Psychology.
- Materials & Procedure
Half the participants received a description of Mary as "intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious" and the other half were presented with the same adjectives in the reverse order, "envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent." Students then rated how sociable and happy Mary was on a 5-point Likert scale.
For the second questionnaire, half the participants read a paragraph about Mr. Thomas, a graduate student at MIT, who was described as a rather *warm* person. While, the other half of participants were informed that Mr. Thomas was a rather *cold* person. The *warm-cold* words were the only difference between versions. Participants then rated how self-centered, considerate, irritable, and humorous Mr. Thomas was on a 5-point Likert scale.



Results

- Data was combined from all nine classes for analyses.
- Mary was rated as more sociable and happy when her description included positive traits first compared to when negative traits were presented first (i.e., the primacy effect). See Figure 1.
- Students rated the *warm* version of Mr. Thomas as significantly more considerate, more humorous, less self-centered, and less irritable than the *cold* version of Mr. Thomas. See Figure 2.

Discussion

- These results support the findings of Asch (1946) and Kelley (1950). The *warm-cold* demonstration was slightly more effective overall than the primacy demonstration. The class outcomes were presented to each class individually. Students were often surprised to learn that the mere order of terms or the presence of one word can alter their impressions of someone so drastically.
- Class activities about attribution provide an opportunity for students to share and discuss their attributions. A lively discussion about impression formation and how the primacy effect operates in their personal lives follows the reporting of their ratings. Professors of social psychology, and even introductory psychology, may consider adding these exercises to their presentations as an interactive way to learn.