The source of information in impression formation¹

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Ratings of the value of personality information provided by persons identified by occupational title were obtained. In a subsequent experiment, rated value of a communication source was found to affect the favorability judgments of fictitious persons these sources described. Rated likeability of the sources affected favorability judgments less discriminatively.

Hovland, Janis, & Kelley (1953) divide the problem area of communication and persuasion into four areas. Two of these areas are the communicator and the content of the communication. Recent research in impression formation has allowed for the test of specific hypotheses concerning aspects of the content of the communication. Following Asch (1946), several investigators have formulated theories and experiments employing adjectives to be utilized in formation of impressions of persons. This technique for dealing with communication content has numerous advantages. The adjectives contained in a message have been individually scaled and the influence of events related to value, order, number, etc., have been quantitatively and qualitatively assessed. The scaled adjective technique has led to highly reliable information concerning the effect of the content of communication.

The present study is directed toward adding in a similar fashion another dimension to the study of the effect of communications. The source of the communication will be treated quantitatively and the influence of this variable on the evaluation of the content of communications will be assessed.

Materials

Sources of communications were derived from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (U. S. Department of Labor, 1939). Initial choice was based on immediate recognizability. From this larger list, 288 titles were obtained and submitted to a sample group of Ss who rated the titles presented in a random order in booklets. The instructions to the raters were "to indicate how valuable you would regard the information they (potential informants) may provide about the traits or characteristics of persons with whom they associate." A seven-point scale was provided which indicated 6 as "most valuable informant" and 0 as "least valuable informant." The same list in a new order was then submitted to the same Ss who were now instructed to rate the "likeability" of each person designated by a role title. A comparable group of Ss carried out the same ratings but in the reverse order. For the present study, only mean scale values provided by males were employed.

A high-valued (H) source was designated as 4.00 and above and included such titles as social worker, dean, and doctor. Scale values for a medium-valued (M) source were between 3.25 and 2.75 and included such titles as physicist, artist, and notary public. Low-valued (L) sources were designated as 2.00 and below and included piano tuner, meter reader, and seamstress. Two groups of adjectives were selected from those roughly scaled on a similar six-point favorability scale for use in studies by Anderson (1965). Positive (P) adjectives were 4.00 and above. Negative (N) adjectives were 2.00 and below.

Thirty sentences were then constructed in a standard form which read: "Mr. (letters from A to DD) has been described by a (source) as (adjective, adjective, adjective)." All three adjectives were either P or N. An initial list was composed by assigning randomly a source and adjectives to the six combinations, HP, MP, LP, HN, MN, and LN. Five representatives of each combination appeared in the final list. Selections of sources were made from a shuffled pool of 30 titles typed on cards, 10 for each level, and adjectives were chosen from a pool of 90, 45 P and 45 N. After this first list was composed (L_1), two new lists were constructed (L_2 and L_3) by reshuffling the deck of sources and randomly assigning sources to the sentences composed for L_1 . A fourth list (L_C) was identical to the other three but source was eliminated in the sentences which then read, "Mr. (letter) has been described as (adjective, adjective, adjective)." **Procedure**

The lists were presented to groups of male Ss from an introductory psychology course. To each group, composed of from 12 to 15 Ss, one of the lists was read at a rate of approximately 6 sec per sentence. Ss judged the favorability of the described person by circling a number in 30-page booklets, each page of which contained an eight-point scale ranging from highly favorable (8) to highly unfavorable (1). Intermediate points were designated as considerably, moderately, and slightly favorable or unfavorable.

Because only 26 Ss were in the groups to which L_1 was read, the booklets of seven Ss who were read L_2 , L_3 , and L_C were randomly discarded in order to achieve equality. Data were therefore available from 104 Ss.

Results

The ratings of each sentence were summed for each of the six Source-Adjective combinations and means were obtained providing six scores for each S. An analysis of variance was conducted in which List served as a between-Ss variable and Source Value

and Adjective Level as within-Ss variables. No main effect or interaction involving Lists approached a significant level. In Table 1 the mean ratings for each combination of Sources and Adjectives collapsed over L_1 , L_2 , and L_3 are presented.

The data indicated that the higher the level of Source Value the more polarized is the rating of the person described by the adjectives; i.e., a person described by a high-valued source as positive is rated as most favorable and a person described by a high-valued source as negative is rated as least favorable. Medium-valued sources have a comparable effect relative to low-valued sources.

The analysis of variance indicates a significant Source by Adjective interaction ($F=39.62$, $df=2/150$, $p<.05$). The only other significant term appears for Adjectives ($F=804.60$, $df=1/150$, $p<.05$). A further evaluation by means of t tests indicates that all six means in the Source by Adjective interaction differ significantly from each other.

The data associated with L_C may be considered a baseline from which to evaluate the direction of influence of the differential source values. The mean for all sentences containing P adjectives was 6.17 ($SD=0.70$) and for all N sentences, the mean was 2.92 ($SD=0.60$). Individual t tests were conducted between these means and the related means for L_1 , L_2 , and L_3 combined are presented in Table 1. Both HP and LP differ significantly from the baseline P mean but MP does not differ significantly. Neither HN or MN differs significantly from the baseline N mean but LN does differ significantly. It appears that when P adjectives are presented, a sentence with a M source is equivalent to one with no source. H and L sources increase or decrease favorability, respectively. For N adjectives, only L sources serve to alter the impression since H and M sources appear to be equivalent to no source.

It is possible that the differences obtained in Table 1 are based on some other dimension related to the source other than value as an informant. As indicated earlier, scale values were also obtained on likeability of the sources. Employing these values the sentences used in the lists were reclassified following the clas-

Table 2. Mean Favorability as a Function of Likeability of Source and Favorability of Adjectives (L_1 , L_2 , L_3 combined)

Favorability of Adjectives		Likeability of Source		
		High	Medium	Low
Positive	Mean	6.33	6.19	5.77
	S.D.	0.91	0.54	0.55
Negative	Mean	3.01	3.01	3.36
	S.D.	1.18	0.71	0.87

sification employed for value as an informant and new mean ratings for each combination for each S were obtained. This procedure produced different numbers of sentences contributing to the six Source-Adjective combinations. The resultant means for groups are presented in Table 2. The analysis of variance indicates a significant main effect for Adjectives ($F=1568.43$, $df=1/150$, $p<.05$) and a significant Source by Adjective interaction ($F=14.17$, $df=2/150$, $p<.05$). An evaluation by t tests of the means in Table 2 indicates that LP differs significantly from HP and MP, which do not differ from each other, and that LN differs significantly from HN and MN, which do not differ from each other. It appears then that differences in terms of likeability of sources are less discriminatively responded to than are differences in the source's information value.

Discussion

The present study may be viewed as supplying a more quantitative basis for dealing with source of communication variables than has been previously utilized. In much previous research, variables associated with source characteristics have been treated in a rather arbitrary fashion. At the discretion of E, sources have been chosen on criteria that at times have yielded effects on behavior and as frequently have produced no influence. The technique of pre-scaling the qualities of sources allows for more adequate differentiation of the pool of sources. Of course, it is not possible at present either to specify the determinants of the judgment of value of an informant or the various dimensions that compose or overlap this quality. Only further research will clarify these issues.

References

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Note

1. Thanks are due to David Myers and Charles Schmidt for their assistance.

Table 1. Mean Favorability as a Function of Value of Source and Favorability of Adjectives (L_1 , L_2 , L_3 combined)

Favorability of Adjectives		Value of Source		
		High	Medium	Low
Positive	Mean	6.39	6.00	5.77
	S.D.	0.64	0.64	0.50
Negative	Mean	2.88	3.10	3.36
	S.D.	0.73	0.81	0.85