

# Relative influence of evaluative sign and evaluative dimensions in impression formation

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Correlational techniques were used to assess the relative influence of positively and negatively evaluated adjectives representing two different dimensions of evaluation (sociability and responsibility) on evaluations of sets containing those adjectives. Relative influence was determined by comparing zero-order correlations between individual evaluations of adjectives and evaluation of sets; the adjective whose evaluation, across people, was most similar to the evaluation of the set was considered as having the greatest influence. Among consistently positive sets, sociability had the greater influence, and among consistently negative sets, responsibility had the greater influence. Among sets combining both positive and negative attributes, the negatively evaluated traits in general had the greater influence. However, this latter effect could be attributed to the influence of negative descriptions on the responsibility dimension only. These results suggested that evaluative decisions differed in social distance as a function of the evaluative nature of the set.

Investigations of the relative influence of positive and negative information on evaluative impressions has yielded conflicting results. In some cases, negative information has been found to be more salient than positive (Miller & Rowe, 1967), while in other cases no difference has been found (Weinstein & Crowds, 1968). Negative information has been found to be more persistent over time, regardless of the order of presentation (Cusmano & Richey, 1970; Richey & Dwyer, 1970; Richey, McClelland, & Shimkunas, 1967), more persistent only if presented first (Briscoe, Woodyard, & Shaw, 1967), or no more persistent than positive information (Margulis, Costanzo, & Klein, 1971). It is evident that a model utilizing more explanatory parameters than simple classification of descriptive stimuli as positive or negative in evaluative sign is needed if the conditions under which negative information is more influential are to be defined.

Recent research has indicated that evaluations of social stimuli are not simple unidimensional responses. Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan (1968), for example, found that two bipolar dimensions, one representing a "social" evaluative dimension and the other an "intellectual" evaluative dimension, were necessary to account for their data on perceived adjective similarities. Hays (1958) found quite similar dimensions using a different metric technique. More directly, Bryson (1970) has reported that a factor analysis of purely evaluative responses to a set of 16 adjectives selected to represent both positive and negative aspects of two denotatively different dimensions defined two orthogonal bipolar evaluative dimensions. As hypothesized,

evaluations of adjectives were differentiated along denotative lines.

The existence of such separate evaluative dimensions suggests, among other things, that the inconsistencies regarding the question of relative influence of positive and negative information may be a function of the influence of the underlying dimensions defined by the descriptive stimuli rather than the salience of their evaluative signs alone.

The present study used correlational techniques to assess the relative influence of adjectives within a set on evaluations of that set. The influence of a given adjective was defined experimentally as the correlation between the evaluation of that adjective, presented individually, and the evaluation of the set. The higher the correlation, the more the evaluation of the set was like that of the given adjective. The adjective evaluation having the highest correlation with the set evaluation was defined as the most influential element in evaluation of that composite as, across people, the evaluation of the set was more similar to the evaluation of that particular adjective than to the evaluation of any other adjective in the set.

## SUBJECTS

Complete data were obtained from 72 of 75 participants, all of whom were students in undergraduate psychology courses offered during a summer session.

## PROCEDURE

A set of 16 adjectives reported by Bryson (1970) as defining two separate, bipolar, evaluative dimensions were used as the basic stimulus set. Positive sociability (S+) was represented by the adjectives *sociable, friendly, outgoing, and warm*; negative sociability (S-) by

*unsociable, unfriendly, introverted, and cold*; positive responsibility (R+) by *responsible, reliable, dependable, and conscientious*; and negative responsibility (R-) by *irresponsible, unreliable, undependable, and unconscientious*.

The Ss were asked to rate their evaluation of a person described by each of these adjectives, using a 9-point scale anchored at the extremes by the words "most positive" and "most negative." They were then asked to make similar evaluations of 136 sets containing 2, 3, or 4 of these adjectives. Adjective sets presented to the Ss were either combinations of positively evaluated adjectives from each dimension (S+R+, N = 34 sets), negatively evaluated adjectives from each dimension (S-R-, N = 34 sets), or combinations which crossed both evaluative sign and evaluative dimension (S+R-, N = 34 sets, and S-R+, N = 34 sets). Within each condition, sets were balanced so that, for each set size, an equal number of adjectives were from each dimension. Adjectives from the same dimension but of opposed evaluative sign were not combined into sets, because pretesting had revealed S resistance to such inconsistencies.

## RESULTS

Evaluative responses to the individually presented adjectives were correlated with the sets in which they appeared. These correlations were examined to determine the adjective correlating most highly with, or having the greatest influence on, the evaluation of each adjective set. These adjectives were classified by evaluative sign and evaluative dimension they represented as entries in contingency tables.

The relative influence of the two evaluative dimensions, controlling for evaluative sign, was determined by collecting all evaluatively homogeneous sets (S+R+ or S-R-) in a 2 by 2 contingency table in which one dimension represented the evaluative dimensions. Entries in each cell represented the number of times an adjective from a given dimension

Table 1  
Relative Influence of Evaluative Dimensions in Evaluatively Homogeneous Sets

Set Type	Evaluative Dimension		$\chi^2$
	Socia- bility	Responsi- bility	
S+R+	27	7	11.76
S-R-	11	23	4.23
	Total		15.99

Note—Entries are number of times an adjective from a given dimension had the highest correlation with a given set type. Expected value is 17 in each cell.

Table 2  
Relative Influence of Evaluative Dimensions  
in Evaluatively Heterogeneous Sets

Set Type	Evaluative Dimension		$\chi^2$
	Socia- bility	Responsi- bility	
S+R-	2	32	26.46
S-R+	22	12	2.94
	Total		29.40

had the highest correlation with an adjective set of that evaluative sign. The expected number of such observations is equal to the proportion of adjectives from either dimension multiplied by the number of sets of that sign. Because of the balanced set construction, this was always one-half the number of sets of that sign. Chi-square analysis demonstrated a significant overall effect ( $\chi^2 = 15.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the relative influence of the evaluative dimensions was a function of the evaluative sign of the set. A partitioning of the chi square demonstrated that among positively evaluated sets the sociability dimension had significantly greater influence ( $\chi^2 = 11.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the responsibility dimension was more influential in evaluations of negatively evaluated sets ( $\chi^2 = 4.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The relative influence of evaluative sign in conjunction with evaluative dimension was assessed by collecting the evaluatively heterogeneous (S+R- or S-R+) sets into a second 2 by 2 contingency table with entries as defined above. In general, negatively evaluated adjectives had the greater influence on evaluations of adjective sets ( $\chi^2 = 29.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, this relationship was not consistent; it was moderated in part by the influence of evaluative dimensions. Among S+R- sets, the negatively evaluated responsibility adjectives were much more influential ( $\chi^2 = 26.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among S-R+ sets, on the other hand, the greater influence of the negatively evaluated sociability adjectives failed to meet conventional significance levels ( $\chi^2 = 2.94$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

#### DISCUSSION

When adjectives are classified by

evaluative dimension, it becomes evident that evaluative sign is not the only general factor involved in determining which adjective will have the greater influence on evaluation of the adjective set. While negatively evaluated adjectives did have a greater influence on evaluations of sets combining positive and negative qualities, this was primarily due to the prepotence of adjectives attributing qualities of irresponsibility to the target person. These same adjectives were also more influential when combined with other negatively evaluated adjectives. The greater influence of descriptions of sociability relative to those of responsibility, however, disallows the simple explanation that responsibility is just a more important dimension for evaluative judgments.

A more appropriate model would require some relationship between evaluative sign of a set and the salience of evaluative dimensions. Within the limited range of dimensions sampled in the present study, such a model appears psychologically reasonable. When a person possesses consistently positive characteristics, one's evaluation of him is concerned primarily with decisions of close social distances (Triandis, 1961). These decisions, such as friendship, would by their nature depend more on social qualities. When a person is described in part or entirely by negative traits, evaluative decisions would be concerned with more distant relationships, such as accepting a person as a neighbor or student in one's university, since the target person would have been eliminated from closer relationships. The responsibility, or more correctly irresponsibility, of the target would be more critical for decisions such as these.

The use of internal correlational analyses as a method for assessing the relative influence of adjectives on evaluations of a set differs from the approaches used in prior studies and deserves further application. It allows a relatively more subtle form of analysis, demonstrating differences in style of evaluation rather than

differences in mean level of evaluation as a function of combining stimuli having disparate qualities. Using this approach, the hypothesis that evaluative dimensions are important variables in predicting relative influence was supported. Further research should be undertaken to investigate the salience of other possible evaluative dimensions, and the effects of the nature of the description on the S's selection of an appropriate evaluative dimension.

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