Snyder, M., Tanke, E.D., & Berscheid, E., Social Perception and Interpersonal Behavior: On the self-fulfilling Nature of Social Stereotypes, JESP, 1977, 35, 656-666

This research is about self-fulfilling influences of social stereotype in two person social interaction. It approaches attribution theory from another unexplored angle -- what are our cognitive and behavioral consequences of our impressions of other people?

The researchers believe that social stereotypes have a strong influence on how we attribute behavior and respond to it. In fact, social stereotypes may influence information processing to bolster and strengthen these stereotypes.

It has been long seen that people often notice and remember those attributes that correspond to their existing stereotypes of people. However, it may also be true that people use these stereotypes to predict future behavior of people, and that the stereotypes may influence their own interactions with the person. This influence may induce actions by the other person that affirm the existing stereotype -- a self-fulfilling loop.

Thus "interaction guided by perceptions" causes a behavioral confirmation of the perceiver's intial impressions.

The researchers choose phycial attractiveness as a variable for study, because prior research has shown that physical attractiveness stereotypes strongly influenc 'liking' perceptions and social interactions. They hypothesized that male student who were led to believe a female target was either physically attractive or unattractive would interact differently based on their internal stereotype and also generate stereotype-affirming behavior by the female target. Furthermore, this difference would be discernable by other observers naive to the stereotype influences and physical attractiveness levels of subject or target.

Procedure

The recruited both male and female subjects, ostensibly for a phone conversation exercise. The males received biographical info and a puported photo of the female (either an attractive or unattractive photo) while the females received nothing.

Before the conversation, the males rated their initial impression of the female in a questionnaire. Then they had a 10 minute unstructured conversation with the female (recorded). Both males and female then completed impression questionnaires, and females answered additional questions about her enjoyment of the conversation, talking comfortableness, and other questions.

Then other psychology students listened to only the female portion of the recordings and rated their voices on scales like "How animated and enthusiastic is this person?", "How much is she enjoying herself?". Another group assessed the male voices in a similar manner.

Results

It was clear from the pre-conversation assessments that men who anticipated physically attractive partners expected to interact with comparatively sociable, poised, humorous and socially adept women. In contrast, the other men expected unsocialble, awkward, serious, and socially inept women.

It was also clear that the unbiased observers rated the women in the "attractive" condition different from the "unattactive" condition. "What had initially been reality in the minds of the men had become reality in the behavior of the women with whom they had interacted.

Also men who interacted with women who they thought were attractive were more sociable, interesting,

outgoing and humorous than the men in the unattactive condition.

Discussion

The results show that stereotypes can affect future interaction and produce behavior in others that reaffirms one's impressions of them. Other stereotypes such as sex and race should have similar effects. Thus "events in the social world may be as much the effects of our perceptions of those events as they are the causes of those perceptions".s