Objective Self Awareness and the Perception of Others

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Abstract. The effect of objective self awareness on interpersonal discrimination was examined. Subjects viewed several videotapes, each presenting a different female being interviewed for a job. Objective self awareness was induced in half the subjects by training cameras on them as they viewed the tapes. Because of a divided focus of attention associated with objective self awareness, self aware subjects were expected to demonstrate less discrimination among stimulus persons than were non self aware subjects. This hypothesis was supported.

Impression formation typically occurs in the context of social interaction. Yet, aside from a few investigations (e.g., Argyle and Williams, 1969), little consideration has been given to how basic features of social interaction affect impression formation. Accordingly, the present research abstracted a central aspect of interpersonal encounters—self-consciousness—and examined the effect of this variable on impression formation.

Recently, the causes and consequences of self-consciousness have received theoretical and empirical attention from social psychologists. The major impetus for this interest is objective self awareness theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972). According to this theory, conscious attention is bi-directional—one can focus either on salient aspects of the environment (subjective self awareness) or on salient aspects of the self (objective self awareness). These attentional states are said to be mutually exclusive; a person cannot be subjectively and objectively self aware at the same time, although attention can oscillate rapidly between the two states. This implies rather directly that in social interaction self-focused attention would interfere with attention to other. Compared to a detached observer, then, a self-conscious observer should be less attentive to the variety of behaviors emitted by someone which would aid in detailed impression formation.

A likely consequence of this divided focus of attention is a relative inability to discriminate among others in terms of various judgmental dimensions. The self-conscious person may not be able to differentiate Person A from Person B, for example, with regard to an intelligence dimension. The ability to discriminate among stimulus objects on judgmental dimensions is considered a central property of cognitive structure. Though typically examined as an individual difference variable (cf. Bieri, 1966; Scott, 1969), the present analysis suggests that this cognitive facility may be responsive to situational variations. In particular, it is hypothesized that subjects induced to feel objectively self aware should be less discriminating in their judgments regarding others than should non self aware subjects.

Method

Procedure. The study was described as an exercise in "impression formation." Sixty four females from undergraduate psychology courses were recruited in exchange for several course credits or fewer credits plus $2.00. By means of videotape, subjects observed each of 5 college
age females who were being interviewed for a job as a counselor at a summer camp for inner city children. It was explained that following each taped interview segment, subjects would describe the interviewee by completing an appropriate "impression scale." Subjects were run in groups of 9 to 15.

The format was identical for the 5 interviews. In each one, the interviewer (a male confederate) and interviewee (one of 5 female confederates) sat facing each other from a distance of approximately 5 feet. The positioning of the camera -- behind and slightly above the interviewer -- allowed the subjects to observe the interviewee from a vantage point that closely approximated that of the interviewer. The interviewer initially asked several factual questions (e.g., "What's your background in counseling?"). Later questions were somewhat more challenging, requiring some thought on the part of the interviewee (e.g., "How would you handle some problem cases that might arise?"). Although the interviewee was familiar with the questions ahead of time, she was not given any explicit instructions on how to respond to them. As a result, there is some variance between the 5 segments in both the style and content of interviewee responses. Each segment was approximately 5 minutes in length. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two random orders of tape presentation.

Upon completion of each segment, subjects completed an "impression scale." Each scale required the subject to indicate how well each of 20 trait adjectives described the interviewee. 7-point scales were provided for these judgments. At a pre-testing session 2 weeks prior to the experimental session, subjects had described themselves in terms of the same 20 adjectives. Upon completion of the last impression scale, subjects were debriefed as to the intent of the study and the deceptions employed.

Self awareness manipulation. Subjects were randomly assigned to either a self awareness condition or a control condition. The room in which both conditions were run was equipped with 2 videotape cameras, permanent fixtures of the room. They were located approximately 7 feet above the floor on opposite sides of the room. The positioning of the TV monitor and chairs was such that the cameras appeared to be more or less trained on the subjects. Subjects in the self awareness condition were told that they would be videotaped as they viewed the interview segments for purposes of an unrelated study in "body language." They were told further that one of several trained undergraduates would view the tape and code the subject's body language into various categories, such as apparent attention, relaxation, and interest in the interviewee. This cover story was intended to induce self-consciousness of the sort that occurs in social interaction. No tapes were in fact made, although a confederate of the experimenter operated the cameras from an adjoining control room. In the control condition, the cameras were trained on the wall, away from the subjects, and it was pointed out that they would not be operated at any time during the session.

Measure of discrimination. To assess a subject's discrimination of stimulus persons along trait dimensions, the $H$ statistic, a measure derived from information theory (cf. Garner, 1962), was calculated for each of the 20 trait dimensions. If the proportion of the 5 stimulus persons in the $i$th interval of the 7 interval categories on a given dimension is $p_i$, then

$$H = \sum_{i=1}^{7} p_i \log p_i$$

$H$ is the number of "bits" of information contained in the distribution of stimulus persons on the trait dimension. It reflects the "levelness" of
the distribution, and can be thought of as a measure of variance which is independent of the central tendency of the distribution. Minimum discrimination (H=0) would occur if a subject assigned the same dimensional category value to all 5 stimulus persons; maximum discrimination (H=2.3) would occur if each stimulus person were assigned a different dimensional value. (See footnote 2). Since the impression scales were expected to be factorially complex, a summary H measure was to be computed for each factor. That is, the H value for the items that loaded on a given factor were to be averaged to yield a summary H value for that factor.

Results

As indicated above, a discrimination measure was calculated for each major factor from the impression scales. Unfortunately, the size of the sample (N=64) was too small to warrant factor analyses of these scales. Since pilot research with larger subject samples demonstrated considerable stability in the factor structure of these scales, however, it seemed reasonable to define the same 3 factors in the present study and compute the respective discrimination values on that basis. As a check on the appropriateness of this procedure, the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of each of these factors for each stimulus person was calculated. The resultant alphas were uniformly high (mean alpha = .81, SD = .11), and thus provide support for the assumed factor structure. The 3 factors (and their associated items) are as follows: Competence (clear-thinking, indecisive, competent, independent, mature, intelligent); Activity (active, humorous, excitable, sociable, extraverted); and Social value (timid, awkward, rigid, tense, dominant). The discrimination measures for the 3 factors were significantly intercorrelated across subjects (mean r = .45).

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed to test the effect of self awareness on the 3 discrimination measures. This analysis revealed a significant main effect, F (3,58) = 3.54, p < .01, and the univariate F-ratios representing the effects of self awareness were significant for all 3 discrimination measures. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that, as predicted, mean discrimination was lower in the self awareness condition than in the control condition.

Table 1
Means on Discrimination Factors as a Function of Self Awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discrimination factor</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>1.405</td>
<td>1.646</td>
<td>22.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>1.332</td>
<td>1.475</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social value</td>
<td>1.435</td>
<td>1.555</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It could be argued that the lower discrimination manifested by subjects in the self awareness condition was due to assimilative projection on their part rather than to inefficient information processing. Self-focused attention might have made subjects' own traits salient and hence available for projection onto the stimulus person. If a subject's rating of the stimulus persons reflected her own self-ratings, then she would demonstrate little discrimination in her ratings of them. A correlational analysis was therefore performed to see if self awareness subjects tended
to assume greater similarity with stimulus persons than did control subjects. Within each condition, a product-moment correlation was computed across subjects between subjects' self-rating and average rating of the 5 stimulus persons on each of the 20 trait dimensions. These correlations were then transformed (Flesch's Z transformation). The difference in transformed correlations between conditions was calculated for each trait dimension and tested for significance (see Guilford, 1965, pp. 189-190). Of the 20 comparisons, only 3 were significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed test), and none at $p < .01$. (The average correlation between self and stimulus person rating was $r = .264$ in the self awareness condition, $r = .371$ in the control condition). Thus, self awareness subjects apparently were no more likely than control subjects to assume similarity with stimulus persons.

Though manipulation checks on objective self awareness are problematic (Wicklund, 1975), supplementary data provide evidence for the successful manipulation of this variable. At the pre-testing session, all subjects completed a test of self-concept certainty (Vallacher, Note 1). Self-concept uncertainty would seem to represent a predisposition toward objective self awareness; an individual who is uncertain of what he is like should be highly concerned with how others perceive and evaluate him, since such information is basic to self-definition. Based on a median split, an equal number of certain and uncertain subjects were assigned to the self awareness and control conditions. Tests for simple effects demonstrated that, for uncertain subjects, the difference between the self awareness and control conditions was significant for all 3 discrimination measures (competence: $M = 1.28$ and 1.49, respectively, $F = 5.11$, $p < .05$; activity: $M = 1.38$ and 1.62, $F = 11.15$, $p < .01$; social value: $M = 1.36$ and 1.52, $F = 4.07$, $p < .05$). In contrast, for certain subjects the difference between the self awareness and control conditions attained significance only for discrimination of the activity factor ($M = 1.43$ and 1.68, $F = 11.54$, $p < .01$). The self awareness manipulation thus had a greater effect on subjects who would seem to be predisposed toward such an effect.

**Discussion**

As predicted, the discrimination of stimulus persons was detrimentally affected by objective self awareness. If this finding is generalizable to the real-world situation from which it was abstracted—simultaneously perceiving and being perceived by unfamiliar others—it is pertinent to an understanding of person perception in the initial stages of the acquaintance process. When two individuals encounter each other for the first time, they not only form impressions of one another, they also are concerned with their presentation of self and with the impression that this presentation has on other. Because of this divided focus of attention, each person is likely to make "either-or" judgments of the other person with regard to judgmental dimensions. Conceivably, after repeated encounters with another person we feel less self-conscious, and can therefore attend more fully to the cues emitted by other which aid in person perception. In such circumstances, a person's impressions are less likely to be of an "either-or" nature, and thus he should manifest greater discrimination in his judgments.

The use of cameras in this study was a convenient and controlled means of abstracting only one central feature of social interaction, namely, the awareness of being observed. Obviously, there are other important features of social interaction, and these too may be abstracted and examined in a controlled setting. For example, in interaction an individual is not only observed but also responded to by others. Certain parameters of audience response—positive vs. negative affect, attention vs. inattention, etc.—are likely to affect person perception and are worthy of explicit investigation.
Reference Note


References


Footnotes

1. Reprint requests should be addressed to Robin R. Vallacher, Department of Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL 60616.

2. In a pilot study (N=83), the tendency to note variation between the 5 segments was correlated (p < .05) with perceivers' psychological well-being (i.e., a measure of self-concept certainty) and capacity for differentiation (field independence as measured by The Concealed Figures Test).

3. In the pilot study, subjects rated the same stimulus persons, plus a close friend of the same sex and someone of the same sex they knew but did not like.