Chapter 1

The First Impression

The basic issues of person perception are forming a first impression about another person and drawing conclusions from this impression. These two topics are therefore treated in Chaps. 1 and 2. The first chapter emphasizes the processes involved in impression formation, whereas in Chap. 2 stress is laid upon the conclusions that are drawn from the first impression.

Consider the following example: in the 1970s "the godfathers of heavy metal" (Rolling Stone, July 1985), Jimmy Page and Robert Plant — better known as Led Zeppelin — were famous for their characteristic stage shows. One of the topics discussed in this chapter deals with the question of whether there are certain central cues that influence the first impression of a person more than other peripheral cues. The loudness of Led Zeppelin's music was probably one such central cue that strongly determined how the band was perceived. In addition, I shall discuss the influence of overall evaluations of a stimulus person on ratings of specific aspects of that person. In terms of the above example, when an observer holds a positive opinion about Jimmy Page or Robert Plant, he or she will tend to attribute positively evaluated characteristics to them (e.g., sincere, dynamic, exciting, attractive). Given a negative overall evaluation, an observer will tend to attribute less favorable characteristics (e.g., not sincere) to the stimulus person. Thus an implicit personality theory about the "godfathers" emerges that is inferred from initial cues.

Central Characteristics and Gestalt Perception

Each of us meets a wide variety of people in everyday life. Even during short encounters a first impression emerges and subsequently influences social behavior (Kelley, 1950; Widmeyer & Loy, 1988).

Well-known public figures are good examples to illustrate how person perception functions. They may be politicians or actors and also heroes from fiction and comics. Consider Hagar the Horrible, by Dik Browne; Hagar is a
mighty man but often expresses childish inclinations. His strength and vitality are manifested in his outer appearance, but the “born leader” often pursues infantile goals. For instance, Hagar gets extremely upset when he finds a leak in the wine cask, whereas he hardly takes any notice of a leak in the Viking ship. Another time he is eager to secure the largest piece of cake for himself.

In spite of the seemingly contradictory characteristics attributed to Hagar, his stories are very popular and fascinate many readers in a way only rarely reported of students reading a psychology textbook. In fact, everyday sayings provide schemata for categorizing Hagar’s behavior. Hagar reminds one of the German proverb which says that there is a child in every man, which means that even sincere and maybe frightening men exhibit childlike wishes or behavior. Using this notion, Hagar’s contradictory characteristics are integrated into a familiar overall impression that transcends the single traits.

How Contradictions May Form a Unity

First impressions do not emerge slowly over a long period of time but are formed almost immediately during the first encounter with the target person. Once an impression has been formed it is maintained over a long time, even if no further contact with the stimulus person takes place. From the very beginning an impression represents a homogeneous unity that develops quickly and usually lasts for a long time (Asch, 1946, p. 258; Hamilton, 1981).

Impression formation is best considered as a process by which an organized overall impression emerges in which single traits receive specific meanings. Every single trait can have a variety of meanings when seen in isolation. For instance, daring may be interpreted as courageous on the one hand and as reckless on the other hand. Connotative meanings of crafty may range from clever to sly (see Hamilton & Zanna, 1974). It is only in context that the range of meanings narrows and a trait receives a specific interpretation.

In the tradition of Gestalt psychology, Asch (1946) formulated the hypothesis that the impression of a person is more than the sum of his/her single characteristics. In “Forming Impressions of Personality” he contrasted three models of impression formation (see Box T1) which since then have influenced research on person perception.

**Box T1. Models of impression formation**

Several models describe the process by which different information may be integrated to give an overall impression.

1. **Summation model:** The overall impression is the sum of the independent impressions based on single items of information: overall impression = a + b + c + d + e (single items of information are represented by a – e).

2. **Generalized halo effect:** Rating scale judgments as measures of various traits and characteristics of a person tend to be strongly correlated. To the extent that these correlations are spurious and do not correspond to actual relationships between the rated traits, the overall impression is in-