ABSTRACT: This research investigated cognitive processes affecting the accuracy of performance evaluation. One hundred and twenty-five nurses from three hospitals completed questionnaires measuring their cognitive categorization processes and then rated a videotaped nurse's performance. Results focusing on the match between raters' cognitive categories and rating scales indicated that: a) rating accuracy was related to the match between raters' cognitive category dimensions and rating scale dimensions, but b) not related to the match between rating scales and raters' general tendency to describe ratees in terms of behavioral or trait characteristics. Raters' ability to differentiate clearly between rating dimensions was related to accuracy and to halo in ratings. Finally, work experience was related to raters' cognitive systems while prior rating experience was important for accuracy. Limitations of the study and implications for future research are discussed.

According to the cognitive processing view, appraising performance involves gathering, storing and recalling information (Cooper, 1981; Feldman, 1981; Ilgen & Feldman, 1983; Landy & Farr, 1980). Central to this view is the categorization of information into dimensional schemata (Ilgen & Feldman, 1983). It is assumed that performance information is stored in memory in cognitive categories and that the nature of these categories affects rating accuracy. However, little empirical work exists which attempts to assess directly the nature of such categories (Murphy & Cleveland, 1991; Nathan & Lord, 1983). The present study examines raters' category systems in relation to the accuracy of their performance evaluations.

Address correspondence to Cheri Ostroff, Industrial Relations Center, University of Minnesota, 537 Management and Economics Bldg., 271 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455.
Two bodies of research are relevant to the effects of categories on appraisal accuracy: implicit personality theory and personal construct theory. Each of these theories provides some explanation of the role of raters' categories in the rating process.

IMPLICIT PERSONALITY THEORY

Implicit personality theory is concerned with individuals' beliefs about the covariation of traits (Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954; Schneider, 1973). Raters tend to use their own trait-like categories, or implicit theories, to judge others (Passini & Norman, 1966) which may affect the evaluation of others (Hakel, 1969; Krzystofik, Cardy & Newman, 1988; Norman & Goldberg, 1966; Passini & Norman, 1966). It has been suggested that raters whose implicit theories about performance closely match the ratees' actual performance are more likely to provide accurate ratings than those whose implicit assumptions about behavior are inconsistent with actual performance (Borman, 1983; Landy & Farr, 1980; Nathan & Alexander, 1985).

Further, implicit personality theory has been used to explain two rating errors, halo and systematic distortion. Halo errors are assumed to be present when artifactually high intercorrelations among performance dimensions are observed (Borman, 1975; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Systematic distortion reflects the tendency to overestimate the degree of correlation between dimensions that are semantically similar, such as interpersonal skills and verbal fluency (Shweder & D'Andrade, 1980).

Most work on implicit personality theory related to performance ratings has focused on rating errors (e.g., Cooper, 1981; Kozlowski & Kirsh, 1987; Murphy & Jako, 1989). What is needed at this point is an assessment of the implicit theories that people use. Personal construct theory provides a basis for addressing the theories used by people by exploring individual differences in cognitive category systems relevant to person perception.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY

In his personal construct theory, Kelly (1955) asserted that each individual formulates constructs through which he or she views the world of events. That is, individuals develop personal construct systems, or categories, which they use to judge people and events. While similar to implicit personality theory in that both theories postulate interpersonal "filtering" of information by perceivers, personal construct theory examines individual differences in these filters, while implicit person-