

Literature Review
Impression Formation
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Running Head: REVIEW OF IMPRESSION FORMATION LITERATURE

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Abstract

Theories of impression formation suggest that we organize and integrate available information about a person into an overall impression. The process involves cues from the stimulus person that are associated with central traits, which are the basis for inferences that lead to the formation of an impression. The time course of impression formation has been speculated to be rapid. Knowledge of the time interval of this process could yield insightful information about the influences in the process. Physical attractiveness could serve as a primary source in the formation of an impression.

Literature Review of Impression Formation

Impression formation involves the organization and integration of the information available about a person into an overall impression (Penner, 1986). It has been speculated that the formation of an impression is a rapid process (Allport, 1937, Cook, 1979). Schneider, Hastorf and Ellsworth (1979) suggest that one of the first judgements people make about a person is whether they like the person or not, and that judgements based on physical attractiveness are immediate. Physical attractiveness studies (Berscheid, Walster, 1974, Miller, 1980) have shown that high ratings of physical attractiveness are associated with positive responses, whereas, low ratings of physical attractiveness are associated with negative responses (Berscheid, Walster, 1974).

Theories of Impression Formation

The literature on impression formation is rather vague. It does not clearly define, or explain the process of impression formation, but rather provides bits and pieces of possible processes.

Three theories have been developed in an attempt to explain the process of impression formation.

1) Implicit personality theory postulates that we develop impressions based on central traits that are associated with certain characteristics, which we use to make personality inferences. 2) Linear Combination Models involve the addition or averaging of incoming information based on the favorability of the stimuli to form an impression. 3) The Cognitive Model focuses on the cognitive processes in the development of an overall impression.

Implicit Personality Theory

People have beliefs about what other people are like. Implicit personality theory suggests that people develop certain relationships between certain traits and characteristics, and make inferences to a personality from them. Jones (1982) suggests that the process involves the use of categories to describe the range of attributes that we perceive in others (i.e. physical features, attitudes, abilities, traits and behavior). We then form beliefs about which of the perceived characteristics go together and which do not. Various research studies

involving traits, stereotypes and physical attractiveness suggests the existence of an implicit personality theory.

Frank Asch, 1946, the pioneer of work on impression formation, suggests that central traits influence impressions, and that other traits are organized around a central trait for their meaning. Asch demonstrated the effect of a central trait by exposing two groups of subjects to one of two conditions. The subjects in both conditions were given a description of a stimulus person in which the only difference in the treatment conditions was the descriptive term "warm" or "cold". Results showed that the two groups of subjects formed very different impressions of the stimulus person. The "warm" stimulus person was perceived as friendly, whereas, the "cold" stimulus person was perceived as unfriendly. Further research by Asch demonstrated that not all traits, but traits with a more definitive meaning are central to the formation of an impression. Asch proposed that people process, organize, and modify the information they receive from their environment (Asch, cited in Hastorf,

Schneider, Polefka, 1970).

Kelly (1950) attempted to measure inner-observer variables of a live person based on Asch's "warm-cold" variable. Prior to exposure, two groups of subjects were given a description of a professor, either of the "warm" or "cold" variable trait. Subjects were asked to report their impressions of the live stimulus person (the professor). Results did not show inner-observer variables were significant. Results did support Asch's findings that persons described as "warm" were rated more favorably than those described as "cold" (Kelly, 1950).

The research methodology of Asch and Kelly and other similar type studies during the 1950's are limited. The goal is to determine the influence of a descriptive trait in the formation of an impression. The experimenter's decision to use specific traits in the description of a stimulus person influences and directs the subject's formation of an impression. The inferences are based on a certain characteristic which is predetermined. The subjects are not exposed to forming an impression

independently of the experimenter's manipulation. The research supports the theory that we have internal representations of central traits. It does not consider the entire process of initial cues that lead to the development of traits, which are then inferred to personality characteristics.

Linear Combination Models

Linear combination models involve the addition or averaging of incoming information based on the favorability of the stimuli to form an impression. The incoming stimuli are perceived and associated with traits, and inferences are made from the traits to form an impression. The process involves a number of traits which are evaluated positively or negatively. It is the balance between the evaluations of the traits which forms the impression. The increase in strength, between evaluations, serves as confirmation of the inference to be made. For example a person perceived to be honest, may then be evaluated as hard working, followed by other likeable characteristics, which confirm our expectancies of the individual. The combination of the units of inferences results in an impression

(Warr, Knapper, 1969). Linear combination models focus on the inference of traits from written descriptions, or observed behavior experiments. These models do not consider the role of cues which lead to the development of trait associations to inferences.

Cognitive Model

The cognitive model began research in impression formation in the mid 1960's. The cognitive model focuses on the cognitive processes of stimulus input and output that underly impression formation. It considers the process to involve the memory processes of attention, encoding, and rehearsal. The model incorporates the idea of implicit personality theory by acknowledging that what we previously have stored in long-term memory partially determines the process of impression formation. Hamilton, Katz and Leirer (1980) view implicit personality theory as a set of cognitive categories or schemata that the perceiver uses in selecting and encoding information about another person. The information is organized in terms of schematic categories and results in an impression as one learns

more and more about a person (Hamilton, et al, 1980).

The cognitive model postulates that we can acquire information about another person from many sources (i.e. observation, hearsay, direct interaction). Not all of the information received will be processed by the perceiver. Distinctive or salient information has a better chance of being encoded, therefore effecting the cognitive representation of the person perception. Cognitive schemas play a role in the selecting and encoding of information as well. The schemas are referred to as one's own implicit personality theory, and are based on knowledge from past experience. The schemas are brought into the person perception situation influencing the information processed by organization into schematic categories. This schematic structure is the basis for the inferences made about a person in impression formation (Hamilton, et al. 1980).

Research by Newiston, Enquist and Bois (1977) supports the position that we actively select information about another person. Newiston et al. asked two groups of subjects to view a videotape while simultaneously pushing a button to indicate the beginning and end of a behavior sequence.

One group was asked to break the behavior sequences into small meaningful components, while the other group was asked to break the behavior sequences into large components. Results verified Newiston's assumption that the perceiver actively controls the amount of information while observing another. He also found that subjects who broke the behavior components into small sequences were more confident of the impression they formed, indicating an additive component in impression formation.

The theories of impression formation suggest that certain types of information from a stimulus person are influential in the formation of an impression. The perception of cues from a stimulus person are associated with specific traits, and inferences about a person's personality are made from the association of traits and characteristics. The research on impression formation has focused on the relationship of trait inferences. However research is lacking in the initial process of the cue/trait relationship, and its strength in the formation of an impression.

Time Course

The theories of impression formation suggest that the process of impression formation involves the organization and integration of the information available about a person into an overall impression. It has been speculated that the formation of an impression is a rapid process. However, the term rapid has not been clearly defined. Time constraints may have an influence on the processing of information about an individual. In some situations the information available may be overwhelming, in which case we selectively attend and process a limited amount of information when forming an impression. Often the information available may be limited, such as in a brief encounter with a stranger, where physical features may be more salient than other personal characteristics of the individual. Whatever, the information the observed person delivers about himself to the perceiver, it has a direct effect of the perceiver's interpretation of the individual. We do not perceive half a person. "One strives to form an impression of an entire person. The impression tends to become complete even when the evidence is meager.

It is hard not to see the person as a unit (p. 12, Smith, 1968)."

Gordon Allport (1937) suggests that the formation of a general impression is rapid. He suggests that a three second visual perception of a stranger will result in a general impression 30 seconds later. In this context the person makes evaluative judgements based on physical characteristics, and will derive conclusions of sex, age, ethnic background and economic status. In the initial phase of impression formation visual cues of physical attributes are a primary source of information.

Lyman, Hatlelid, and Macurdy (1981) selected the time period of 50 seconds to determine what aspects of a stimulus person are used in forming a first impression and how those aspects relate to an attraction response. Subjects were exposed to a 50 second, visual videotape of a stimulus person. The subject was then asked if he would like to know the person just viewed. The subjects were then asked to point out what made them like/dislike the stimulus person, while viewing the film a second time. Results showed that the category of physical features (i.e. eyes, lips, hair, teeth) were

influential first impression cues affecting an attraction response. Lyman et. al.'s results were influenced by the limits imposed by their method. The visual presentation consisted of only head and shoulder exposures of the stimulus person, eliminating aspects of non-verbal behavior which may be used as cues in forming an impression. Audio presentations of stimulus persons were also not included, thereby eliminating additional cues which also may be used as cues in impression formation.

Zunin and Zunin (1972) report an observation at a cocktail part, from which they concluded that it takes four minutes on average for a person to decide whether or not to continue an interaction with a new acquaintance. The time may be less than four minutes, as social pressures may have had an influence on the observed time for a person to disengage graciously from the interaction. Zunin and Zunin's study does suggest that the formation of a like/dislike response towards a new acquaintance occurs in a matter of a few minutes.

Studies involving time are suggestive of the processing time necessary. Most studies that use time

involve it as a descriptive measure of exposure time allotted to the subject, or as the subject's reaction time. Time has not been directly measured from the onset of the presentation of a stimulus person, to the development of a judgement of the stimulus person in impression formation. Hamilton et al. (1980) suggest that the process of impression formation is based on the sequential presentation of information, and that the information gathered over time is incorporated into a cognitive representation that begins to develop with the first available information. The separation of the sequential presentation of information by time intervals could provide insight into the process of the cue-trait-inference relationship in the formation of an impression. In consideration of Allport (1937) and Zunin and Zunin's (192) observations, the time period of impression formation ranges from 30 seconds to four minutes.

Physical Attractiveness as an Influence on Impression Formation

One of the first judgements people make about a person are whether they like them or not (Schneider et al., 1970). Bryne (1971) suggests that the

formation of a like/dislike attitude can develop in a few minutes based on perceived similarity. The degree of physical attractiveness has been related to preferences in liking and for personality traits. Schneider et al. (1979) suggest that judgements based on physical features are immediate.

A part of the categorization process in implicit personality theory involves the use of stereotypes. Stereotypes are part of the central traits we use in forming an impression. We infer that people are similar along certain dimensions and develop a mental prototype of what people are like (Jones, 1982). The stereotype for physical attractiveness appears to exist at a very young age. Adams (1982) review of stereotype studies indicate that infants by the age of four months prefer visually pleasing human forms; by the age of three years children know the cultural standards of physical attractiveness; and by the age of seven years children are able to rate pictures for physical attractiveness with ratings similar of twelve and seventeen year olds. A universal stereotype exists within our culture for physical attractiveness. .

Furthermore, the degree of physical attractiveness has been related to preferences in liking and for personality traits. Evidence suggests that attractive persons are expected to have more socially desirable characteristics than unattractive individuals. Walster's computer dance in which subjects were randomly assigned dates, and later filled out a questionnaire during and after their date, found that physical attractiveness was an important factor in determining an attraction response. Results indicated that the more physically attractive the date was the more he or she was liked (Berscheid, Walster (1969). A study by Dion, Berscheid and Walster asked subjects to examine photographs of men or women and to evaluate the pictures on dimensions of personality traits. Results showed that the expectations of personality characteristics for attractive individuals consisted of traits that were more socially desirable, than traits for unattractive individuals. Descriptions of the inferred personality traits for the attractive individuals consisted of "warm, sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, modest, sociable (p. 169, Berscheid, Walster, 1974)."

whereas, Adams describes inferred traits for unattractive individuals as "aggressive, unkind, undisciplined (p. 285, Adams, 1982)."

A study by Miller (1970) supports Dion et al. results that the physically more attractive are perceived to have more socially desirable personality traits. Miller also found that for those on the moderate and of physical attractiveness sex differences existed when making inferences to traits. Miller suggests that males are able to compensate for low attractiveness ratings, by possessing socially desirable attributes (i.e. education, financial).

Research has not been concerned with those on the moderate range of attractiveness.

Physical attractiveness research indicates that the extremes of physical attractiveness have stereotype traits. Penner (1986) postulates that the model of implicit personality theory allows people to use limited information, such as physical characteristics, to form an evaluative judgment of a person, and to form an impression of the person, without seeking additional information. Therefore,

high and low degrees of physical attractiveness could play an influential role in the formation of an impression of a person.

The literature on measures of physical attractiveness has focused on the extremes of the continuum. Research shows that ratings of high physical attractiveness are associated with positive traits and like responses, whereas, low ratings of physical attractiveness are associated with negative traits and dislike responses. Further, suggesting that physical attractiveness may serve as a primary source in impression formation.

Conclusion

Theories of impression formation are concerned with how we interpret information received about an individual into an overall impression. The process of impression formation involves cues from the stimulus person, which are associated with specific traits that lead to inferences about the individual, resulting in an overall impression. Most of the research has focused on the trait inference process and not on the role the initial cues have on the trait. It has been demonstrated that people make

inferences from traits to form an impression. It is uncertain whether cues or traits play the primary role in impression formation.

It has been speculated that the time course of impression formation ranges from 30 seconds (Allport, 1937) to four minutes (Zunin, Zunin, 1972). A separation of the sequential processing of information in impression formation by time intervals could provide insight into the cue, trait, inference relationship, as well as their influences. The time measurement of impression formation from the beginning of a presentation of a stimulus person to the formation of an impression would provide information regarding the length of the process.

One of the first judgements people make about a person is whether they like them or not, and that judgements based on physical features are immediate (Schneider et al., 1970). External characteristics reflect internal characteristics of the individual, and we base an evaluation of the person based on those inferences. Studies (Miller, 1970, Berscheid, Walster, 1974) have shown that high ratings of physical attractiveness are associated with positive

traits and a like response, and that low ratings are associated with negative traits and dislike responses. The degree of physical attractiveness could serve as a primary source in impression formation, thereby influencing the time required to form an impression.

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Time Course of the Formation
of Like/Dislike Attitudes
Based on Physical Attractiveness

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Running Head: TIME COURSE OF IMPRESSION FORMATION

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine the time required to form an impression. If the degree of physical attractiveness is a primary source in impression formation, target persons perceived to be high or low on the attractiveness range would be liked/disliked sooner than those in the moderate range. 45 subjects participated in a social judgment task. Subjects were assigned to 1 of 3 target persons, and 1 of 3 time interval exposures of 60, 120, or 180 seconds. Subjects indicated the amount of like/dislike for the target person on a sliding scale which was scored for start/stop times. Latency to first judgment showed no significant difference, $F = (4, 34) = .755$ $p > .05$. Time to last judgments were more consistent and immediate for those targets on the extremes of the attractiveness range, than for those on the moderate, $F = (4, 34) = 3.564$ $p < .05$.

Time Course of the Formation of Like/Dislike
Attitudes Based on Physical Attractiveness

Impression formation involves the organization and integration of information available about a person into an overall impression (Penner, 1986). It has been speculated that the formation of an impression is a rapid process (Allport, Cook, 1979). However, the term rapid has not been clearly defined. People make judgements about others rather quickly, regardless of whether the information available is overwhelming or limited. People actively select the information that they attend to and encode about a person (Newston, Enquist, Bois, 1977, Hamilton, Katz, Leirer, 1980). One of the first judgements people make about a person is whether or not they like the person, and that judgements based on physical features are immediate (Schneider, Hastorf, Ellsworth, 1979). Research strongly indicates that the degree of physical attractiveness for those perceived as extremely attractive or unattractive, is influential in the formation of a like/dislike attitude (Miller, 1970, Berscheid, Walster, 1974, Adams, 1982).

Allport (1937) suggested that a three second

perception of a stranger can result in an overall impression thirty seconds later, whereas, Zunin and Zunin (1972) suggested from an observation at a cocktail party that it takes four minutes on average for people to decide whether or not to continue a conversation with a new acquaintance. Therefore the formation of an impression ranges from 30 seconds to four minutes, providing a flexible definition of the term rapid. Lyman, Hatlelid, and Macurdy (1981) exposed subjects to 55 second videotaped exposures of stimulus persons. The time selected of 50 seconds was used as a descriptive measure in their method, and does not indicate the time period from the initial presentation of a stimulus person to the formation of an overall impression of a stimulus person. Lyman et al. (1981) results found that physical cues were influential variables in the formation of a first impression. Studies that have used measures of physical attractiveness have shown that high ratings of physical attractiveness are associated with positive personality traits and positive like responses. Ratings of low attractiveness are associated with negative personality traits and

dislike responses (Miller, 1970, Berscheid, Walster, 1974, Adams, 1982). Research has not been concerned with the effects of a like/dislike attitude for those on the medium range of the attractiveness range.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the time required to form an impression. It was predicted that if the formation of an impression is a rapid process, persons will form an unchanging like/dislike attitude towards a stimulus person within the time period of three minutes. If the degree of physical attractiveness is a primary source in impression formation persons who are perceived high or low for physical attractiveness will be liked/disliked sooner than for those on the medium range of attractiveness.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 18 male, and 27 female university students ranging in age from 18 to 49. All were enrolled in introductory psychology courses and received bonus points for participating in a social judgement task. Treatment of subjects was in accordance with APA ethical standards.

Stimuli

Three male target persons were selected for videotape presentations for first impression like/dislike task from photographs rated for physical attractiveness by nine thesis students. Attractiveness ratings on a scale of one to ten were broken down into score categories of 1-3 (unattractive), 4-6 (moderately attractive), 7-8 (very attractive). Each of the males selected obtained mean scores of 3, 5.2, or 7.8, which fell into one of the physical attractiveness categories. Target persons were subsequently videotaped separately in a sitting position from knees up, discussing the topic of a pet dog with an off camera interviewer. Byrne (1971) indicates that pets are one of the least influential topics in forming an attraction response based on perceived similarity. Each target person wore the same shirt and responded to the questions of the interviewer with the same responses, in an attempt to make each target person as similar as possible.

Apparatus

A moveable scale was designed to measure the subjects continuous, subjective evaluation of a

like/dislike response for the target person. The scale consisted of an 18 inch bar which had a moveable pointer attached to it. The neutral point was marked on the middle point of the bar. Subjects were instructed to move the pointer to the right for like responses, and to the left for dislike responses. Video equipment was used for the filming of target persons, presentation of target persons, and the recording of subject's responses. A stop-watch was used to record the start and stop times of the subjects like/dislike responses on videotape.

Procedure

The time required to form a like/dislike attitude for the target persons was measured. The videotape presentations for each target person consisted of time exposures of 60 second, 120 seconds, or 180 seconds. Subjects were randomly exposed to the presentation of one of the three target persons in conjunction with one of the three time conditions of viewing. Subjects were asked to move the pointer to indicate the amount of like/dislike for the target person while viewing the videotape. The subjects hand movements were videotaped

in order to measure the responses accurately.

After viewing the target persons subjects were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 very unattractive, 5 moderately attractive, 10 very attractive) their rating of the target persons physical attractiveness. Subjects were also asked to indicate the amount of like/dislike for the target person on a scale of -5 (extremely dislike), 0 (neutral) and +5 (extremely like).

Results

Ratings of physical attractiveness differ for static (photograph) ratings versus fluid (videotape) ratings. Means for static ratings of target persons for physical attractiveness were low = 3, moderate = 5.2, and high = 7.8, whereas, fluid rating means for physical attractiveness were in the moderate range of 4.0 to 5.93. Results indicate that there is no correlation between ratings for static versus fluid attractiveness ratings, pearson $r = -.148$.

Like ratings increase on the like/dislike task in conjunction with the subject's fluid evaluation of physical attractiveness of the target persons. Target persons perceived to be low, ratings of 1-3, on the

attractiveness range, received a mean dislike rating of -1.62. Target persons perceived to be moderate, 4-6, on the physical attractiveness range, received a mean like rating of .763. Target persons perceived to be high, ratings of 7-10, on the physical attractiveness range, received mean like scores of 2.12.. Results indicate that as the rating of physical attractiveness increases, the rating of a like response increases, $F(4, 34) = 10.429$, $p < .05$., see Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Latency to first judgment in the like/dislike task shows no difference with the fluid ratings of physical attractiveness. The mean latency response times to target persons were 17.25 seconds for those on the low (1-3) range of physical attractiveness, 19.65 seconds for those on the moderate (4-6) range of physical attractiveness, and 25.5 seconds for those on the high (7-10) range for physical attractiveness. Initial response times of a like/dislike response showed no significance difference, $F(4, 34) = .755$,

$p > .05$ related to the categories of physical attractiveness, see Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Response times between first and last judgements of a like/dislike response indicates that the fluid ratings of physical attractiveness for target persons rated on the extremes of low (1-3) or high (7-10) are rated within a much shorter period of time, than for those on the moderate (4-6) range of physical attractiveness. Mean response times between first and last like/dislike judgements were 4.37 seconds for those on the low (1-3) physical attractiveness range, 8.62 seconds for those on the high (7-10) physical attractiveness range and 52.21 seconds for those on the moderate (4-6) physical attractiveness range, $F(4, 34) = 4.801$ $p < .05.$, see Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

It was also observed that subjects made many more like/dislike movements for the target persons

perceived to be moderate (4-6), than for those on the low (1-3) or high (7-10) range of physical attractiveness.

Like/dislike response times to last judgment shows the length of time required to form a response in conjunction with the rated degree of physical attractiveness. Target persons rated as low (1-3) for physical attractiveness received a mean last response of 21.62 seconds. Target persons on the moderate range (4-6) for physical attractiveness received a mean last response of 68.73 seconds. Target persons on the high (7-10) range received a mean last response time of 35.62 seconds, see Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Results indicate that there are differences to a final like/dislike decision based on the degree of physical attractiveness, $F(4, 34) = 3.564$ $p < .05$.

Discussion

The purpose of the experiment was to determine the time required to form an impression. Latency

of a like/dislike response shows there is not a significant difference on the time to form an initial judgment in conjunction with degrees of physical attractiveness. However, the non-significant finding does suggest that an initial like/dislike response is formed within half a minute. Schneider et al. (1979) suggested that one of the first judgments a person makes about another is whether or not they like the person. Although significant differences were obtained for like/dislike responses on time between first and last judgment, and time to last judgment in conjunction with degrees of physical attractiveness, results indicate that it takes 68.73 seconds to form an overall attraction response. Therefore, it can be concluded that the formation of an impression is a rapid process, which occurs slightly over one minute.

Results support the prediction that individuals who are on the extremes, high or low, on the physical attractiveness range would be liked/disliked sooner than those on the moderate range of physical attractiveness. The like/dislike response times for time between first and last judgment and time to

last judgment shows significant differences in conjunction with the degree of physical attractiveness. Target persons perceived as unattractive received an immediate dislike response, which did not change with exposure times. Time to first response was 17.25 seconds, followed by a 4.37 seconds between first and last responses, which resulted in an overall dislike response formed in 21.62 seconds. Results suggest that unattractive individuals have a dislike impression formed about them very quickly.

Target persons perceived to be very attractive took slightly longer for a like judgment to be made, than unattractive targets. Initial reaction time was 25.5 seconds, slightly longer than the other two attractiveness categories. However the time between first and last, and last judgments were similar to the unattractive targets. The time between first and last like responses was 8 seconds, which resulted in an overall like impression formed in 35.62 seconds. Results suggest that attractive individuals have a like impression formed about them quickly.

The time between first and last judgment for the target persons on the moderate range was 52.21

seconds as compared to 4 to 8 seconds for the other two categories. These results suggest that for persons on the moderate range the cues for perceiving degrees of physical attractiveness are not available. It appears that physical attractiveness is a primary source in the formation of an impression when physical attractiveness is perceived to be extremely high or low.

Like/dislike ratings support previous literature (Miller, 1970, Berscheid, Walster, 1974, Adams, 1982) that persons perceived to be physically attractive are liked, whereas, persons perceived to be unattractive are disliked. However ratings of physical attractiveness are not universal. Comparison of static versus fluid pictures of target persons suggests that photographs are subject to universal rules, possibly due to the lack of available information. Physical features are the only cues available. It appears that on a moving medium one takes into consideration physical features as well as other information when rating a person for physical attractiveness, unless the person is perceived subjectively by the person to be on the extreme of

high or low for physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness then plays a major role influencing a like/dislike response.

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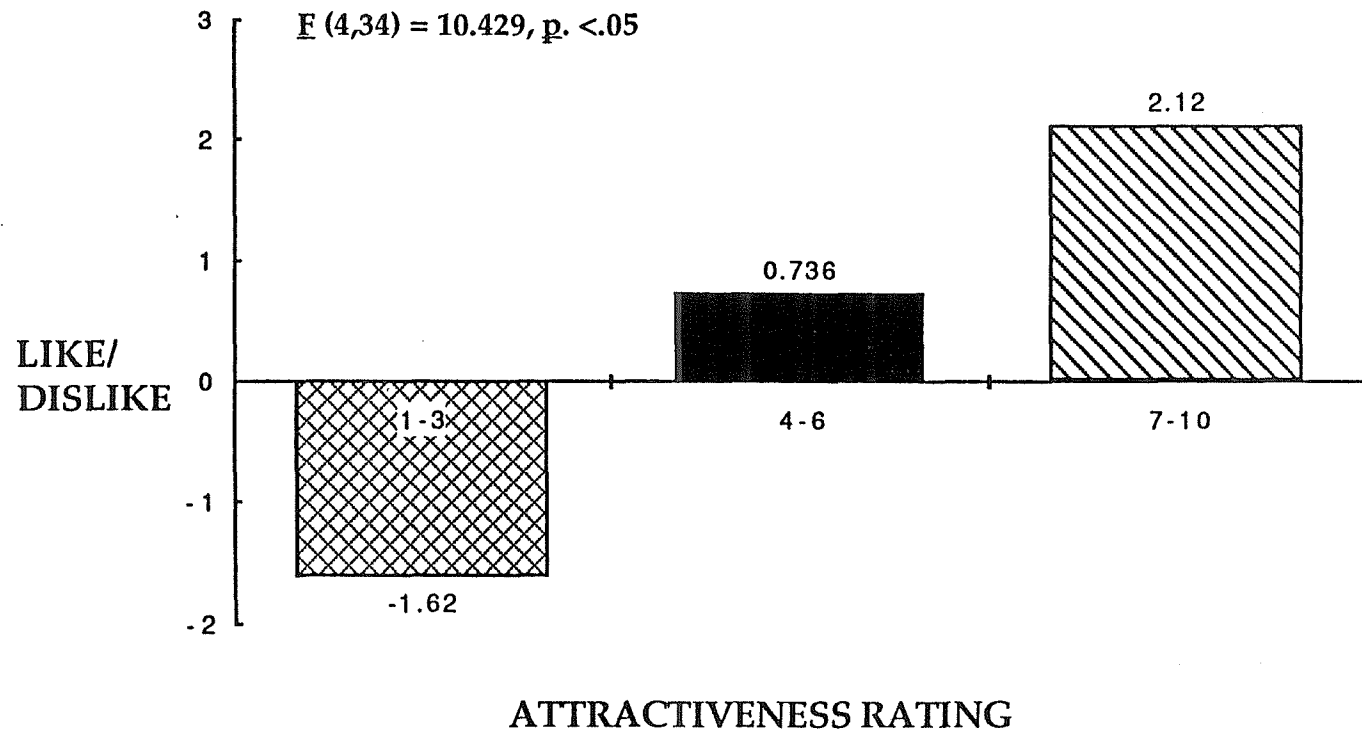
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Like/Dislike of Target Based on Attractiveness.

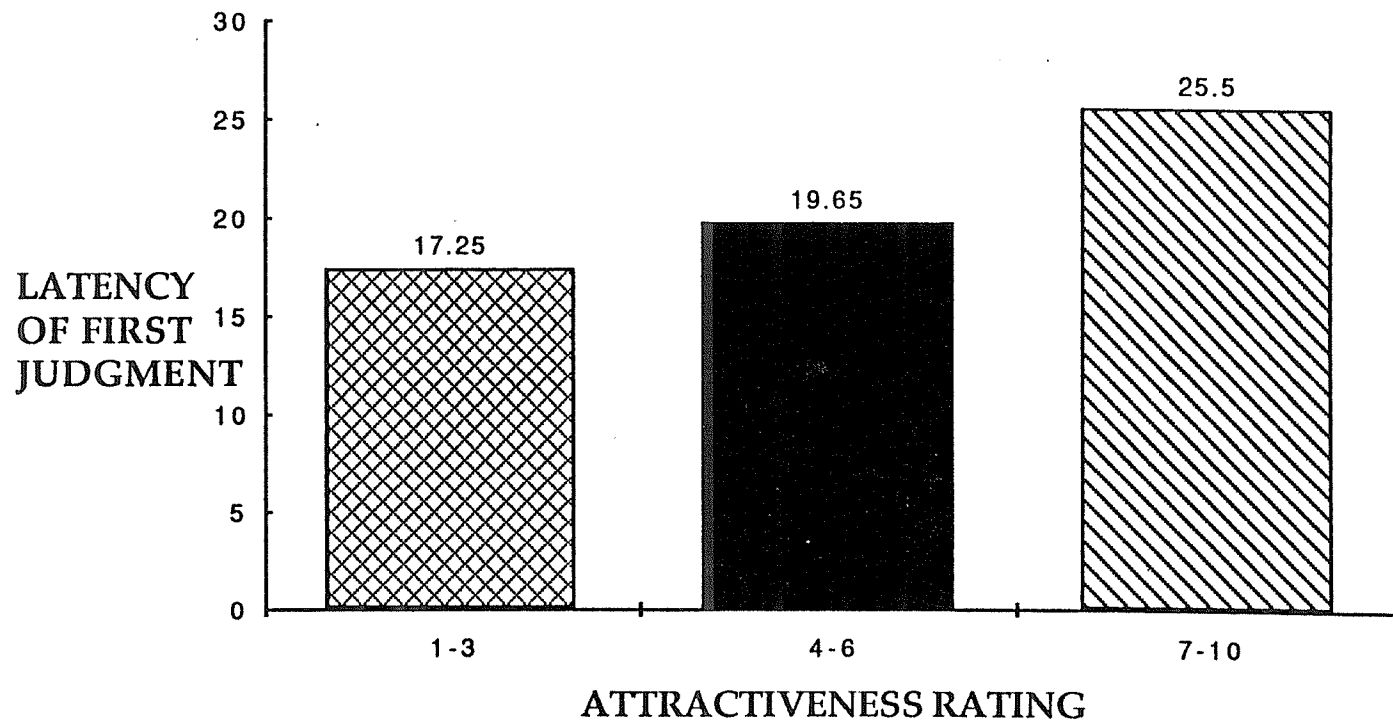
Figure 2. Latency of First Judgment as a Function of Attractiveness Ratings.

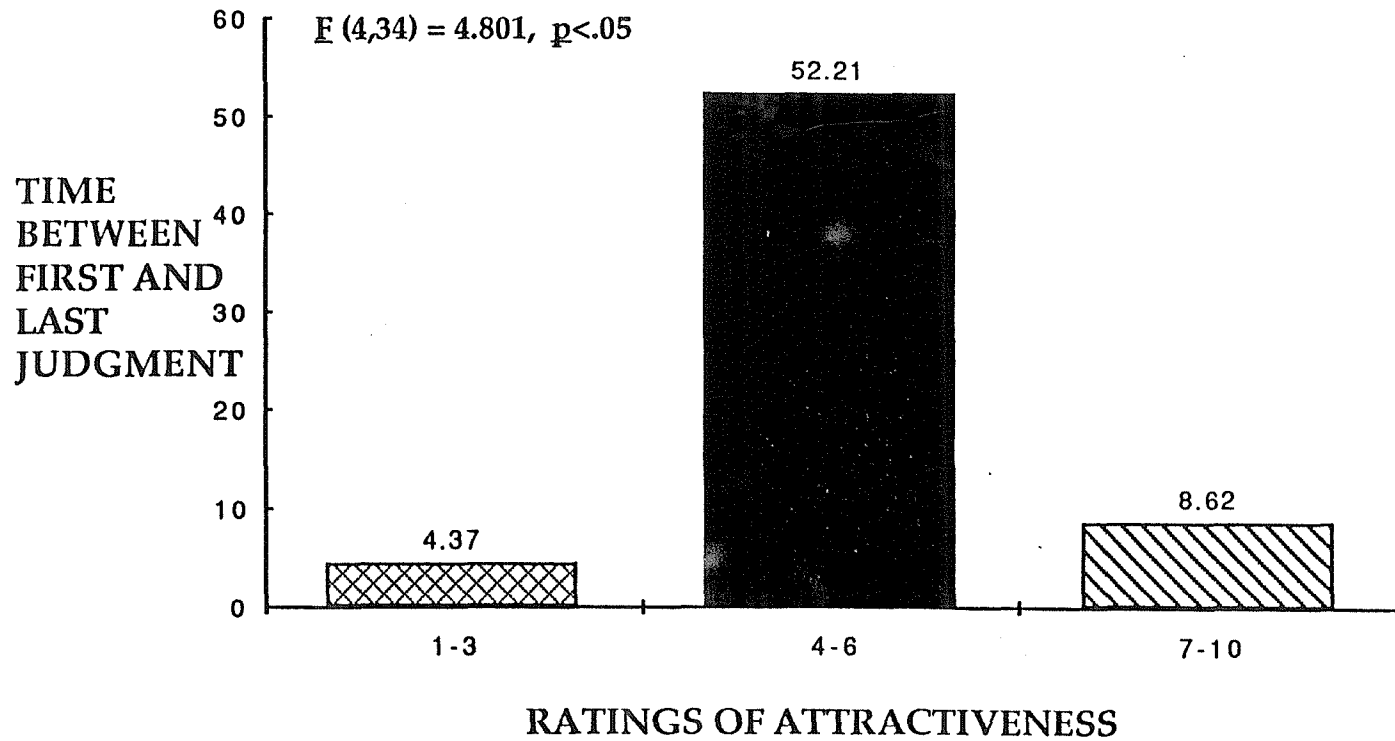
Figure 3. Time Between First and Last Judgment as a Function of Attractiveness of Target Person.

Figure 4. Time to Last Judgment as a Function of Attractiveness.



$F(4,34) = .755, p > .05$





$F(4,34) = 3.564, p < .05$

