



An advantage of appearing mean or lazy: Amplified impressions of competence or warmth after mixed descriptions



Nicolas Kervyn^{a,*}, Hilary B. Bergsieker^b, Fiona Grignard^c, Vincent Y. Zyerbyt^c

^a Louvain School of Management (CCMS), Université Catholique de Louvain, Place des doyens 1, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

^b Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1, Canada

^c Department of Psychology, Université Catholique de Louvain, Place Cardinal Mercier 10, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- Three studies show that compensation effects do not require explicit comparisons.
- Descriptions of mixed valence on warmth/competence lead to more amplified impressions.
- Cold/competent (vs. warm/competent) descriptions lead to more competent impressions.
- Incompetent/warm (vs. competent/warm) descriptions lead to warmer impressions.
- Amplification extends our understanding of innuendo and compensation effects.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 August 2014

Revised 10 August 2015

Accepted 14 September 2015

Available online 16 September 2015

Keywords:

Social cognition

Compensation

Person perception

Impression formation

Warmth and competence

ABSTRACT

Three experiments show that describing a person in mixed rather than consistently positive (or negative) terms on warmth and competence—the two fundamental dimensions of social perception—results in more extreme impressions. Given sparse information on one dimension, amplified (i.e., more extreme) judgments arise when the other dimension is clearly opposite in valence. In Experiment 1, a competent-and-cold target was perceived as more competent than a competent-and-warm target. Experiment 2 extends this amplification effect by manipulating either warmth or competence and adding consistently negative descriptions. Experiment 3 replicates amplification using more naturalistic behavioral descriptions. These findings extend the compensation effect—a negative functional relation between perceived warmth and competence, previously observed only in explicitly comparative contexts—to single-target impression formation. Implications for traditional person-perception models and distributed social cognition are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Often described as stern and cold, Vladimir Putin is seldom pictured smiling. Nevertheless, this man has been elected president of Russia three times, suggesting that Russians perceive him as a competent leader. How could someone displaying strikingly negative warmth traits succeed in a job for which public opinion is so crucial? Traditional impression-formation models (Anderson, 1965; Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950; Srull & Wyer, 1989; for a review, see Fiske & Taylor, 2008) cannot explain such outcomes. These trait-averaging models stress valence: Each attribute describing someone's personality is considered consensually either positive or negative (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), yielding impressions ranging from extremely negative to positive. Negative inputs about a target should produce more negative impressions. But could Putin's coldness help rather than harm his reputation? In fact, negative warmth characteristics appear not to reduce but rather

enhance perceived competence, illustrating a compensation effect (Judd, James-Hawkins, Zyerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kervyn, Zyerbyt, Judd, & Nunes, 2009; Zyerbyt, Kervyn, & Judd, 2008; Zyerbyt, Provost, & Corneille, 2005).

Extensive research reveals that person perception relies heavily on the "Big Two" dimensions of warmth/communion and competence/agency (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008; Wojciszke, 1994, 2005; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Contexts involving comparisons between two individuals or groups elicit compensatory inferences about relative warmth versus competence: A target presented more favorably on one dimension (e.g., warmer) tends to be perceived less favorably on the other dimension (e.g., less competent), relative to the other target (Judd et al., 2005). This pattern, which Zyerbyt et al. (2005) termed the compensation effect, refers to a structural and functional relation between the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment—warmth and competence—such that a positive judgment on one dimension fosters a negative judgment on the other and vice versa (Zyerbyt et al., 2008).

* Corresponding author at: Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain School of Management, Place des doyens 1, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

E-mail address: nicolas.o.kervyn@uclouvain.be (N. Kervyn).

Though structurally distinct, reflecting unique latent components of impressions, perceived warmth and competence may represent “psychological (though not semantic) alternatives” (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, p. 28), pragmatically functioning as opposites in everyday social cognition.

To date, all demonstrations of a compensation effect in person perception employed designs in which participants evaluated two targets in a comparative context rather than a single target individual or group considered alone (for a review, see Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010). For instance, in several experiments, participants formed impressions of paired targets based on their alleged behaviors (Judd et al., 2005): One target was presented as competent and the other as incompetent. Although both targets displayed ambiguous warmth, participants saw the competent target as colder. Compensation also emerged for inferred competence when warmth was manipulated in a comparative context.

Although early work on compensation asserted that “the process of comparing two targets on these two dimensions” is “necessary” to observe this negative relation between competence and warmth (Judd et al., 2005, p. 907), in the present research we propose—and present supportive data—that compensation does not necessarily require an “explicit” comparison between multiple individuals or groups. Unsurprisingly, social judgment takes place in the larger context of perceivers’ normative expectations about others. People generally expect moderately positive information concerning others, so negative information carries special weight in person perception (Fiske, 1980; Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). Insofar as perceivers use a general baseline to appraise incoming social information, encountering a target who displays extreme behavior on a specific dimension may trigger an implied comparison with people less extreme on this dimension. For example, meeting someone who aced an intelligence test makes salient the lower intelligence of many others. Insofar as such tacit comparisons arise, compensation may operate more often than previously proposed. The present studies test whether mixed descriptions of targets (in which competence and warmth cues are opposite in valence, hence ambivalent) lead to amplified—more extreme—perceptions, relative to univalent (non-mixed) descriptions. For example, we predict that a mixed target described by several negative warmth traits and one positive competence trait seems more competent than a univalent target with several positive warmth traits and the same positive competence trait. If sparse information on one dimension (e.g., positive competence) remains constant, we expect amplification on this dimension when the information on the other dimension is clearly opposite (e.g., cold) as opposed to matched (e.g., warm) in valence.

Beyond this theoretical grounding, our prediction of a negative relation between average judgments of warmth and competence in single-target impression formation converges with prior research on the innuendo effect (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012; for a replication see Koch & Obermaier, 2015) and on subtyping of stereotyped targets (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). Research on innuendo reveals that when communicators provide a very positive description of a target on only one dimension, listeners make negative inferences on the other dimension. Compared with a generally positive target, someone described as “very nice, sociable, and outgoing” seems less competent (relative to other unspecified potential group members) and a “very smart, hard-working, and competent” target appears less warm (Kervyn et al., 2012). This evidence suggests that compensation may be possible for judgments of single targets (when perceivers do not explicitly rate two targets) in relation to unspecified others.

Also relevant to the present work is evidence stemming from the stereotype content model, illustrating that ambivalently stereotyped groups are often subtyped via compensatory perceptions. For such targets, increasing either perceived warmth or competence can intensify negative impressions on the other dimension. Relative to a female professional of unspecified family status, a working mother was rated as warmer but also less competent (Cuddy et al., 2004). Similarly, an

elderly person presented as mentally sharp and competent was rated as colder than an elderly person who fulfilled incompetence stereotypes (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). Notably, despite using between-subjects designs, these studies induced participants to rate a specific target against the (implied) background of stereotyped targets. Evidently, perceivers’ stereotypic expectations can create a comparison context that shapes judgment.

The current paper advances theorizing about compensation effects, innuendo, and ambivalently stereotyped groups by testing the claim that compensation needs no explicit comparison via judgment of two targets and by minimizing reference to a comparison target. The present studies systematically test compensation in an impression-formation context lacking an explicit comparison between social targets or even an implied comparison with targets from ambivalently stereotyped groups. Even in minimal conditions—in which only general baseline information may be mobilized—we predict that information on one dimension will be perceived more extremely (i.e., amplified) in the context of a mixed rather than a univalent description. For example, we expect targets to seem especially competent when presented as competent and cold, versus competent and warm. We use a seminal impression formation paradigm (Asch, 1946), introducing individual targets via personality traits.

1. Experiment 1

Participants in Experiment 1 formed an impression of a person described by several personality traits, like those used by Asch (1946) and Zanna and Hamilton (1972), which are clearly valenced (Anderson, 1968). Participants read either a mixed description (4 negative warmth traits, 1 positive competence trait) or a univalent description (4 positive warmth traits, 1 positive competence trait). Competence information was held constant and warmth manipulated. We expected a competent/cold target to appear more competent than a competent/warm target. Notably, ratings of specific traits’ meaning for competence and warmth typically correlate positively with each other across languages (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; e.g., $r = .49$ in Suitner & Maass, 2008). Thus, any amplification from mixed descriptions occurs despite—not due to—“spillover” warmth and competence connotations of specific stimuli, which would otherwise lead to the opposite: Positive (not negative) warmth words would increase perceived competence.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 80 French-speaking undergraduates (43 female, 4 unreported; $M_{\text{age}} = 21$) on campus to fill out a questionnaire and randomly assigned them to read a cold/competent description or warm/competent description, with traits presented in one of two counterbalanced orders. Our dependent variables were perceived warmth and competence. Participant gender and trait order did not influence the results and will not be discussed further.

1.1.2. Procedure and materials

First, participants were asked to form an impression of a target “MD” who would be introduced by means of a list of 5 personality traits (with masculine French adjective endings rendering the target male). Of these traits, 4 were diagnostic of warmth and 1 of competence. The constant competence trait (*industrious*) was always third in the list. All traits related to warmth were positive in the univalent warm/competent condition (*warm, good-natured, sociable, humorous*) versus negative in the mixed cold/competence condition (*cold, disagreeable, unsociable, irritable*). Participants then wrote their impression of the target in a few lines. Consistent with prior research (Zanna & Hamilton, 1972), the written impression did not represent a dependent variable but merely consolidated impressions in participants’ minds. On the next page, participants rated the target on warmth traits (*caring, tolerant, disdainful,*

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947676>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/947676>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)