

# Active Learning Exercises for Teaching Classic Research on Impression Formation in Social Psychology Courses<sup>§</sup>

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**Abstract:** Educators are incorporating more active learning experiences in courses to demonstrate concepts and engage students. In the current study, college students ( $N = 278$ ) enrolled in 10 sections of social psychology completed two survey exercises on impression formation, replicating classic research by Asch (1946) and Kelley (1950). Results confirmed the primacy effect and the warm-cold variable classic research findings in the field of social psychology. These exercises were easy to incorporate into teaching lessons, providing an interesting and interactive class demonstration of impression formation and person perception.

**Keywords:** Active learning, attribution, social psychology, teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

Many teachers in the field of education are interested in helping students move beyond the passive collection of knowledge to the active integration and application of newly learned classroom information [1]. Simply lecturing on topics may impart knowledge, but having the students engage in active learning by completing surveys and other activities may increase comprehension and long-term learning [2, 3]. The current study investigates an active approach to teaching social psychology topics in an undergraduate college course.

Social perception, impression formation, attribution, and social-cognitive biases are important and essential components to most college introductory social psychology courses [4]. Impression formation is the process by which people form judgments about others, taking into account various pieces of information about the person [4]. For example, when we meet someone for the first time, we observe their appearance and mannerisms and we quickly determine whether this first impression was positive or negative. Closely related, attribution focuses on the social motivational dimension of determining the causes of behavior, or why people do the things they do [4]. Students are fascinated to read about the classic and contemporary findings in these areas of social perception and to discuss their experiences in relation to these topics. Incorporating active learning exercises to demonstrate these concepts can increase concept comprehension and spark additional class interactions.

Class activities about impression formation provide an opportunity for students to share their person perceptions and discuss why they made those judgments. In previous research, Berrenberg [5] had students bring in photos of someone they knew well, and the professor presented these photos to the class with a series of questions such as the person's occupation; favorite sports; music preferences; and how liberal, warm, and shy the person was. These questions provided the opportunity for student interaction and debate over consistency in attributions after the students who brought in the photo revealed the true characteristics. Also using a visual aid to teach attribution, White and Lilly [6] discuss a videotaped illustration of attribution theory by having students watch scenarios of couples dancing together under conditions of high consistency, high distinctiveness, and low consensus. This exercise demonstrates Kelley's [7] covariation attribution model and is effective because students enjoy watching the video and trying to make the correct concluding attributions.

However, all studies and teachings of impression formation do not need visual aids to be easily understood. For example, McAndrew [8] had students correct exams containing either a descending or ascending pattern in terms of the same total number of answers being incorrect on the test. Students estimated that the person with the descending pattern was more intelligent than the student with the ascending pattern, a clear demonstration of the primacy effect. Gordon and Kaplar [9] also expanded beyond the use of visual aids and had students play the board game SCRUPLES as a demonstration of the actor-observer bias. Participants reacted to difficult situations with more "depends" than "yes" and "no" responses when rating themselves but more certain "yes" or "no" responses when rating others.

We wanted to add an interactive dimension to the teaching of Asch's [10] primacy effect in impression

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formation and Kelley's [11] warm-cold variable findings by replicating parts of their studies with in-class surveys. Using a survey still enhances students' knowledge of attribution errors and is very time efficient for the classroom setting. We hypothesized that students who read a description of a person with positive traits listed first would rate her as more sociable and happy than students presented with the description listing negative traits first (Asch's primacy effect). We also predicted that adding the word "warm" to a description of a person would increase perceptions of being considerate and humorous while adding the word "cold" to a description would increase perceptions of being self-centered and irritable (Kelley's warm-cold variable effect).

## MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Two hundred seventy eight undergraduate students enrolled in 10 different sections of Social Psychology taught by two different instructors from two different universities participated. Students attended either a small, private college ( $n = 185$ ) or a large, public university ( $n = 93$ ); and the majority of students were women (79.5%).

### Materials and Procedure

Prior to a class lecture on impression formation, attribution, and person perception, we handed out two questionnaires, in random order, asking students to rate two hypothetical strangers, Mary and Mr. Thomas.

We distributed a description of Mary as "intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious" to half of the students and we presented the other half with the same adjectives in reverse order, "envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent" [10]. Students then rated how sociable and happy Mary was on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). See Appendix A.

For the second questionnaire, we instructed half of the participants to read a paragraph about Mr. Thomas, a graduate student at MIT, who was described as a rather *warm* person, whereas the other half read a paragraph where Mr. Thomas was described as a rather *cold* person [11]. The warm-cold words were the only difference between the two versions. Participants then rated how self-centered, considerate, irritable, and humorous Mr. Thomas was on the same 5-point Likert scale used in the assessment of Mary. See Appendix B.

## RESULTS

Although we presented the individual means of student ratings and significance levels of the  $t$  tests to each of the classes the next day the class met, we combined the data from all 10 classes for presentation in this report. As predicted, students rated Mary as more sociable,  $t(276) = 2.56, p = .01, d = .31$ , and happy,  $t(276) = 1.96, p = .05, d = .24$ , when her description included positive attributes first compared to the presentation of negative attributes first

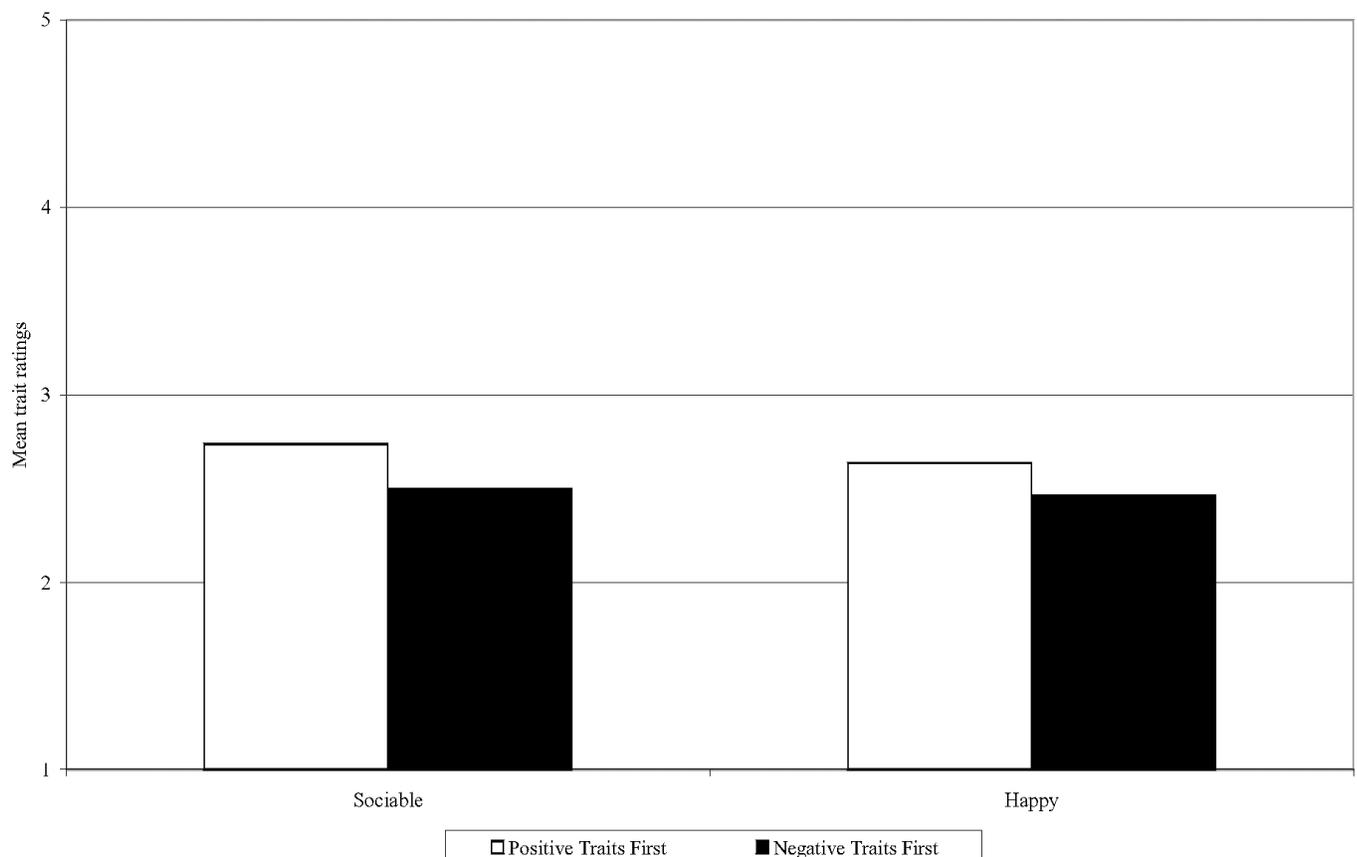
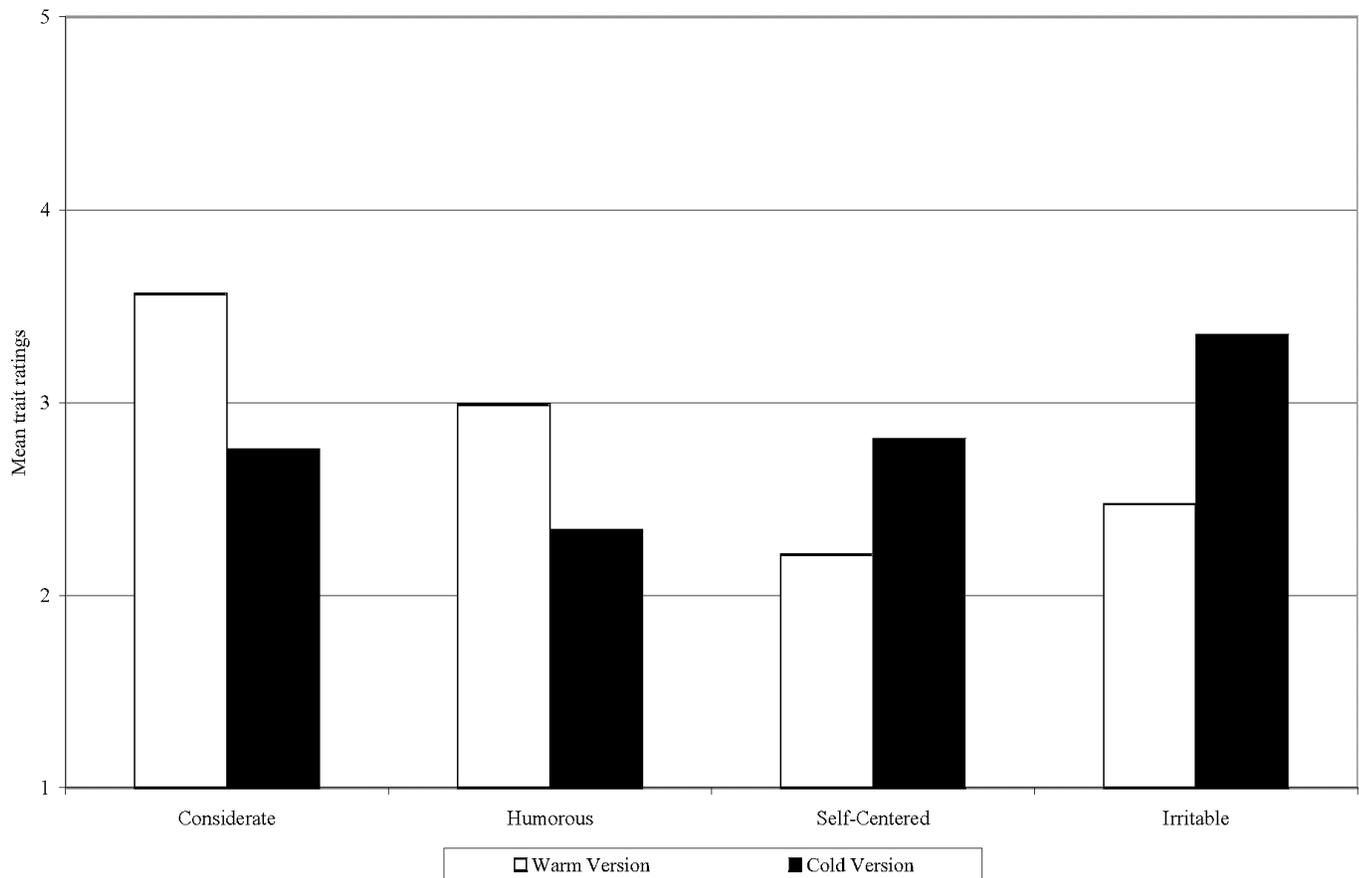


Fig. (1). Mean trait ratings of Mary by trait description order version.



**Fig. (2).** Mean trait ratings of Mr. Thomas by warm/cold description version.

(Fig. 1). Also as predicted, students rated the warm version of Mr. Thomas to be significantly more considerate,  $t(217) = 8.85, p < .001, d = 1.20$ , more humorous,  $t(217) = 7.90, p < .001, d = 1.07$ , less self-centered,  $t(217) = 5.78, p < .001, d = .78$ , and less irritable,  $t(216) = 8.14, p < .001, d = 1.11$ , than the cold version of Mr. Thomas (Fig. 2). We found no main or interaction effects for the additional variables of participant sex and school location on trait ratings.

## DISCUSSION

These results support the findings of both Asch [10] and Kelley [11], and replicate previous classroom techniques designed to teach impression formation [12]. The warm-cold demonstration was slightly more effective overall, based on larger effect sizes, than the primacy demonstration. However, class activities about impression formation provide an opportunity for students to share and discuss their attributions. A lively discussion about person perception and how the primacy effect operates in their personal lives follows the reporting of their ratings. The comprehension of the primacy effect and impression formation is observable through class enthusiasm and an exciting discussion, which convey the effectiveness of both surveys. When we presented class outcomes to each class individually, students were often surprised to learn that the mere order of terms or the presence of one word could alter their impressions of someone so drastically, prompting the exciting discussions aforementioned.

Although the variables of participant sex and school location on trait ratings made no difference in this study, there are some variables that might alter the results. If Mr. Thomas was in the description containing the list of positive and negative traits and Mary was the MIT graduate student, might this affect the students' ratings? Perhaps social and nurturing traits are more associated with females whereas more task-oriented and independent traits are associated with males. This variation may lead to a stimulating class discussion about sex roles and gender stereotypes. A similar scenario could vary ethnic names to discuss trait ratings in relation to stereotyping and prejudice. Requiring students to analyze the data set themselves may also be a useful exercise for aiding in the understanding of statistics and research methods. Classes may consider discussing extraneous variables and what other variables could be altered in this demonstration to change the results.

## CONCLUSION

Professors of social psychology, and even introductory psychology, may consider adding these exercises to their presentations as an interactive learning exercise about person perception and impression formation. These demonstrations are fairly easy to incorporate into any class. Completing the surveys takes less than 10 minutes total, the analysis is not difficult (simple  $t$  tests), and the class discussion time can vary depending on the class and the goals of the instructor. Educators in general can use this information as an example

of how to incorporate active learning exercises into the classroom to stimulate student interest and engagement.

#### APPENDIX A

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement after reading the short description. There are no right or wrong answers. Please be honest.

Mary is intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious.

OR

Mary is envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent.

Mary is sociable

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

Mary is happy

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

See Experiment VI, page 270, of Asch's 1946 study for original research [10].

#### APPENDIX B

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement after reading the short description. There are no right or wrong answers. Please be honest.

Mr. Thomas is a graduate student in the Department of Economics and Social Science at MIT. He has 3 semesters of teaching experience in psychology at another college. He is 26 years old, a veteran, and married. People who know him consider him to be a rather COLD/WARM person, industrious, critical, practical, and determined.

Mr. Thomas is self-centered

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

Mr. Thomas is considerate

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

Mr. Thomas is irritable

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

Mr. Thomas is humorous

(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)

See page 433 of Kelley's 1950 study for original research [11].

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