Social Perception and Interpersonal Behavior: On the Self-Fulfilling Nature of Social Stereotypes

Mark Snyder
University of Minnesota

Ellen Berscheid
University of Minnesota

This research considers the self-fulfilling influences of social stereotypes on dynamic social interaction. Conceptual analysis of the cognitive and behavioral consequences of stereotyping suggests that a person's actions have upon stereotype-activated attributions about a specific target individual may cause the behavior of that individual to confirm the person's initially erroneous attributions. A paradigmatic investigation of the behavioral confirmation of stereotypes involving physical attractiveness (e.g., "beautiful people are good people") is presented. Male "perceivers" interacted with female "targets" whom they believed (as a result of an experimental manipulation) to be physically attractive or physically unattractive. Tape recordings of each participant's conversational behavior were analyzed by naive observer judges for evidence of behavioral confirmation. These analyses revealed that targets who were perceived (unknown to them) to be physically attractive came to behave in a friendly, likeable, and sociable manner in comparison with targets whose perceivers regarded them as unattractive. It is suggested that theories in cognitive social psychology attend to the ways in which perceivers create the information that they process in addition to the ways that they process that information.

Thoughts are but dreams
Pit their effect be tried

—William Shakespeare

Cognitive social psychology is concerned with the processes by which individuals gain knowledge about behavior and events that they encounter in social interaction, and how they use this knowledge to guide their actions. From this perspective, people are "constructive thinkers" searching for the causes of behavior, drawing inferences about people and their circumstances, and acting upon this knowledge.

Most empirical work in this domain—largely stimulated and guided by the attribution theories (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973)—has focused on the processing of information, the "machi

Research and preparation of this manuscript were supported in part by National Science Foundation Grants SOC 75-14872, "Cognition and Behavior: When Belief Creates Reality," to Mark Snyder and GS 3517X, "Dependency and Interpersonal Attraction," to Ellen Berscheid. We thank Marilyn Street, Craig Daniel, and Deane Boettler, who assisted in the empirical phase of this investigation; and J. Merril Cahan, Thomas Hummel, E. E. Jones, Mark Lepper, and Walter Mischel, who provided helpful advice and constructive commentary.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Mark Snyder, Laboratory for Research in Social Relations, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, 75 East River Road, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455.

1 From: The Range of Lucrres, 5an 545-553.

656
people? From our vantage point, current-day attribution theorists leave the individual "lost in thought," with no machinery that links thought to action. It is to the concern that we address ourselves, both theoretically and empirically, in the context of social stereotypes.

Social stereotypes are a special case of interpersonal perception. Stereotypes are usually simple, overgeneralized, and widely accepted (e.g., Kauffman, 1963; Waller, 1969). But stereotypes are often inaccurate. It is simply not true that all Germans are industrious or that all women are dependent and conforming. Nonetheless, many social stereotypes concern highly visible and distinctive personal characteristics: for example, sex and race. These pieces of information are usually the first to be noticed in social interaction and can go high priority for channeling subsequent information processing and even social interaction. Social stereotypes are thus an ideal testing ground for considering the cognitive and behavioral consequences of person perception.

Numerous factors may help sustain our stereotypes and prevent disconfirmation of "erroneous" stereotype-based initial impressions of specific others. First, social stereotypes may influence information processing in ways that serve to bolster and strengthen these stereotypes.

Cognitive bolstering of Social Stereotypes

As information processes, humans readily fall victim to the cognitive process described centuries ago by Francis Bacon (1620/1922).

The human understanding, when any proposition has been once lain down... tends everything to add both support and confirmation... it is the peremptory and peremptory error of the human understanding to be not moved and excibly by affirmatives or negatives. (pp. 23-24)

Empirical research has demonstrated several such biases in information processing. We may overestimate the frequency of occurrence or understate or overstate incidents of our stereotypes simply because such instances are more easily noticed, more easily brought to mind, and more easily retrieved from memory (cf. Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Rothbart, Funder, Jensen, Howard, & Bierrell, Note 1). Evidence that confirms our stereotyped intuitions about human nature may be, in a word, more cognitively "available" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) than non-confirming evidence.

Moreover, we may fill in the gaps in our evidence base with information consistent with our preconceived notions of what evidence should support our beliefs. For example, Chapman and Chapman (1967, 1968) have demonstrated that both college students and professional clinicians perceive positive associations between particular Rorschach responses and homosexuality in males, even though these associations are demonstrably absent in real life. These "signs" are simply those that compose common cultural stereotypes of gay males.

Furthermore, once a stereotype has been adopted, a wide variety of evidence can be interpreted readily as supportive of that stereotype, including events that could support equally well an opposite interpretation. As Norton (1948) has suggested, in-group vigilance ("We are thriftier") may become out-group vigilance ("They are cheap") in our attempts to maintain negative stereotypes about disliked out groups. (For empirical demonstration of this bias, see Regan, Straun, & Fazio, 1974; Rosenhan, 1973; Zimbardo & Moss, 1974). Finally, selective recall and reinterpretation of information from an individual's past history may be exploited to support a current stereotype-based inference (cf. Lott & Palmer, 1974). Thus, having decided that Jim is stingy (as are all members of his group), it may be all too easy to remember a variety of behaviors and incidents that are insufficient one at a time to support an attribution of stinginess, but that taken together do warrant and support such an inference.

Behavioral Conformation of Social Stereotypes

The cognitive bolstering processes discussed above may provide the perceivers with an "evidence base" that gives compelling cognitive reality to any traits that he or she may
have erroneously attributed to a target individual initially. This reality is, of course, entirely cognitive: It is in the eye and mind of the beholder. But stereotype-based attributions may serve as grounds for predictions about the target’s future behavior and may guide and influence the perceiver’s interactions with the target. This process itself may generate behaviors on the part of the target that erroneously confirm the predictions and validate the attributions of the perceiver. How others treat us is, in large measure, a reflection of our treatment of them (cf. Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1968; Rosen, 1965). Thus, when we use our social perceptions as guides for regulating our interactions with others, we may constrain their behavioral options (cf. Kelley & Stahel, 1970).

Consider this hypothetical, but illustrative, scenario. Michael tells Jim that Chris is a cool and aloof person. Jim meets Chris and notices expressions of coolness and aloofness. Jim proceeds to overestimate the extent to which Chris’ self-presentation reflects a cool and aloof disposition and underestimates the extent to which this posture was engendered by his own cool and aloof behavior toward Chris, that had in turn been generated by his own prior labels about Chris. Little does Jim know that Tom, who had heard that Chris was warm and friendly, found that his impressions of Chris were confirmed during their interaction. In each case, the end result of the process of “interaction guided by perceptions” has been the target person’s behavioral confirmation of the perceiver’s initial impressions of him.

This scenario makes salient key aspects of the process of behavioral confirmation in social interaction. The perceiver (either Jim or Tom) is not aware that his original perception of the target (individual of Chris) is inaccurate. Nor is the perceiver aware of the causal role that his own behavior (here, the enactment of a cool or warm expressive style) plays in generating the behavioral evidence that erroneously confirms his expectations. Unbeknownst to the perceiver, the reality that he confidently perceives to exist in the social world has, in fact, been actively constructed by his own transactions with and operations upon the social world.

In our empirical research, we proposed to demonstrate that stereotypes may create their own social reality by channeling social interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to behave more in line with the stereotype. Moreover, we sought to demonstrate behavioral confirmation in a social interaction context designed to interest as faithfully as possible the spontaneous generation of impressions in everyday social interaction and the subsequent channeling influences of these perceptions on dyadic interaction.

One widely held stereotype in this culture involves physical attractiveness. Considerable evidence suggests that attractive persons are assumed to possess more socially desirable personality traits and are expected to lead better lives than their unattractive counterparts (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Attractive persons are perceived to have virtually every character trait that is socially desirable to the perceiver. "Physically attractive people, for example, were perceived to be more sexually warm and responsive, sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, noble, modest, sociable, and outgoing than persons of lesser physical attractiveness" (Berscheid & Walster, 1974, p. 169). This powerful stereotype holds for male and female perceivers and for male and female stimulus persons.

What of the validity of the physical attractiveness stereotype? Are the physically attractive actually more likable, friendly, and confident than the unattractive? Physically attractive young adult are more often and more easily sought out for social dates (Demerit, 1973; Krebs & Adelman, 1975; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rotman, 1966). Even as early as nursery school age, physical attractiveness appears to channel social interaction: the physically attractive are chosen and the unattractive are rejected in sociometric choices (Simon & Berscheid, 1974; Kliek, Richardson, & Ronald, 1974).

Differential amount of interaction with the attractive and unattractive clearly helps the stereotype persevere, for it limits the chance for learning whether the two types of individuals differ in the traits associated with the stereotype. But the point we wish to focus upon here is that the stereotype may also
search, we proposed to type may create their channeling social inter-
ibe the stereotyped su-
we sought to deter-
formance of the social
responsive to mirror as
 spontaneous gener-
ary every-day social in-
channeling indi-
ations on dyadic inter-
teoretic is this culture
active. Considerable
 attributes are the
 are expected to lead
 or unattractive counter-
exist as virtually every
 is socially desirable
to like attractive people,
 be more sensitive,
 sensitive, kind, in-
, modest, sociable, and
 little French at-
elm & Waldner, 1974, p. 3.
for male s and 20 mice and fe-
istry of the physical at-
Are the physically
 are likeable, friendly, and
 attractive? Physically
 to mirror as virtually every
 are rejects in
 and Benschold, 1974: 4.
Ronald, 1974).:
The interaction between perceiver and target:
Fifty-one male and 51 female undergraduates at the University of Minnesota participated, i.e. extra;
more, 6.
The interaction between perceiver and target:
To ensure that participants would not see each
before their interaction, they arrived at sepa-
several experiments in social perception.
The experimenter informed each participant that she
be studying acquaintance processes in social relation-
 was investigated to see how
the initial interactions that involve
were used in telephone conversations, that do act. Thus, the ex-
the participants was assigned to one of the two
condition of perceived physical attractiveness
in the target. Males in the attractive target
and female participants in the unattractive target
the perception of attractiveness are in

The interacti

The interaction between perceiver and target:
To ensure that participants would not see each
before their interaction, they arrived at sepa-
several experiments in social perception.
The experimenter informed each participant that she
be studying acquaintance processes in social relation-
 was investigated to see how
the initial interactions that involve
were used in telephone conversations, that do act. Thus, the ex-
each male perceivers rated his initial impressions of his partner on an Impression Formation Questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed by supple-
menting the 27 trait adjectives used by Democrats, Ber-
scheid, and Walster (1972) in their original investiga-
tion of the physical attractiveness stereotypes with the following items: intelligent, physical attractiveness, social adeptness, friendliness, enthusiasm, trustworthiness, and conscientiousness. We were thus able to assess the extent to which perceivers' initial im-
pressions of their partners reflected general stereotypes linking physical attractiveness and personality characteristics.

The getting-acquainted conversation. Each dyad then engaged in a 10-minute unstructured conversa-
tion by means of microphones and headphones con-
ected through a Sony TC-750 stereophonic tape recorder that recorded each participant's voice on a separate channel of the tape.

After the conversation, male perceivers completed the Impression Formation Questionnaire to record their final impressions of their partners. Female targets expressed self-perceptions in terms of the items of the Impression Formation Questionnaire. Each fe-
nale target also indicated, on 10-point scales, how much she had enjoyed the conversation, how com-
fortable she had felt while talking to her partner, how accurate a picture of herself she felt that her partner had formed as a result of the conversation, how typical her partner's behavior had been of the way she usually was treated by men, her perception of her own physical attractiveness, and her estimate of her partner's perception of her physical attractiveness. All participants were then thoroughly and care-
fully debriefed and thanked for their contribution to the study.

Assessing Behavioral Conformation

To assess the extent to which the actions of the target provided behavioral conformation for the stereotypes of the men perceivers, 8 male and 4 female introductory psychology students rated the tape recordings of the getting-acquainted conversa-
tions. These observer judges were unaware of the experimental hypotheses and knew nothing of the actual or perceived physical attractiveness of the individuals on the tapes. Instead, in random order, to a 4-minute segments (one each from the beginning and end) of each conversation. They heard only the track of the tapes containing the target women's voices and rated each woman on the 34 bipolar scales of the Impression Formation Question-
naire as well as an additional 10-point scales; for example, "How animated and enthusiastic is this person?" How intimate or personal is this person's conversation?", and "How much is the enjoying her-
sell?" Another group of observer judges (3 males and 4 females) performed a similar assessment of the male perceivers' behavior based on only the track of the tapes that contained the male's voices.

Results

To chart the process of behavioral conformation of social stereotypes in dyadic social interaction, we examined the effects of our manipulation of the target women's apparent physical attractiveness on (a) the male per-
ceivers' initial impressions of them and (b) the women's behavioral self-presentation dur-
ing the interaction, as measured by the ob-
server judges' ratings of the tape recordings.

The Perceivers' Stereotype

Did our male perceivers form initial im-
pressions of their specific target women on the basis of general stereotypes that associate physical attractiveness and desirable person-
ality? To answer this question, we examined the male perceivers' initial ratings on the Impression Formation Questionnaire. Recall that these impressions were recorded after the per-
ceivers had seen their partners' photographs, but before the getting-acquainted conversa-
tion. Indeed, it appears that our male per-

We assessed the reliability of our raters by means of intraclass correlations (Ebel, 1953), a technique that employs analysis-of-variance procedures to determine the proportion of the total variance in ratings due to variance in the persons being rated. The intraclass correlation is a measure of reliability that commonly used with interval data and ordinal scales that assume interval properties. Because the measure of interest was the mean rating of judges on each variable, the between-rater variance was not included in the error term in calculating the intraclass correlation. (For a discussion, see Tinley & Weis, 1975, p. 361). Reliability coefficients for the coder's ratings of the females for all dependent measures ranged from .35 to .91 with a median of .755. For each dependent variable, a single score was constructed for each participant by calculating the mean of the raters' scores on that measure. Analysis of variance, including the time of the tape segment (early vs. late in the conversation) as a factor, revealed no main or significant effects of time or inter-
actions between time and perceived attractiveness that would have been expected by chance. Thus, scores for the two tape segments were summed to yield a single score for each dependent variable. The same procedure was followed for ratings of male perceivers' behavior. In this case, the reliability coefficients ranged from .18 to .83 with a median of .51.

These and all subsequent analyses are based upon a total of 38 observations, 29 in each of the
ceivers did fashion their facial impressions of their target partners on the basis of stereotypic beliefs about physical attractiveness, multivariate F(34, 35) = 10.19, p < .04. As dictated by the physical attractiveness stereotype, men who anticipated physically attractive partners expected to interact with comparably seductive, poised, humorous, and socially adept women; by contrast, men faced with the prospect of getting acquainted with relatively unattractive partners fashioned images of rather unseemly, awkward, serious, and socially inept women, all F(4, 36) > 5.85, p < .025.

Behavioral Confirmation

Not only did our perceivers fashion their images of their interaction partners on the basis of their stereotyped intuitions about beauty and goodness of character, but these impressions polluted a chain of events that resulted in the behavioral confirmation of these initially erroneous inferences. Our analyses of the observer judges' ratings of the women's behavior were guided by our knowledge of the structure of the men's initial impressions of their target women's personality. Specifically, we expected to find evidence of behavioral confirmation only for those traits that had defined the perceivers' stereotypes. For example, male perceivers did not attribute differential amounts of sensitivity or intelligence to partners of differing apparent physical attractiveness. Accordingly, we would not expect that our observer judges would "hear" different amounts of intelligence or sensitivity in the tapes. By contrast, male perceivers did expect attractive and unattractive targets to differ in sociability. Here we would expect that observer judges would detect differences in sociability between conditions when listening to the women's contributions to the conversations, and thus we would have evidence of behavioral confirmation.

To assess the extent to which the women's behavior, as rated by the observer judges, provided behavioral confirmation for the male perceivers' stereotypes, we identified, by means of a discriminant analysis (Tabachnick, 1971), those 21 trait items of the Impression Formation Questionnaire for which the mean initial ratings of the men in the attractive target and unattractive target conditions differed by more than 1.4 standard deviations. This set of "stereotype traits" (e.g., social, poised, sexually warm, outgoing) defines the differing perceptions of the personality characteristics of target women in the two experimental conditions.

We then entered these 21 stereotype traits and the 14 additional dependent measures into a multivariate analysis of variance. This analysis revealed that our observer judges did indeed view women who had been assigned to the attractive target condition quite differently than women in the unattractive target condition, F(25, 57) = 40.003, p < .025. What had initially been really in the minds of the men had now become reality in the behavior of the women with whom they had interacted—a behavioral reality discernible even by naive observer judges, who had access only to tape recordings of the women's contributions to the conversations.

When a multivariate analysis of variance is performed on multiple correlated dependent

3 After the 25 trait dimension, the differences between the experimental conditions were highly significant. For example, the next adjective pair down the list has a difference of 1.14 standard deviations, and the one after that has a difference of 1.02 standard deviations.
measures, the null hypothesis states that the vector of means is equal across conditions. When the null hypothesis is rejected, the nature of the difference between groups must then be inferred from inspection of group differences on the individual dependent measures. In this case, the differences between the behavior of the women in the attractive target and the unattractive target conditions were in the same direction as the male perceivers' initial stereotyped impressions for fully 17 of the 21 measures of behavioral confirmation. The binomial probability that at least 17 of these adjectives would be in the predicted direction by chance alone is .03. By contrast, when we examined the 13 trait pairs that our discriminant analysis had indicated did not define the male perceivers' stereotype, a sharply different pattern emerged. Here, we would not expect any systematic relationship between the male perceivers' stereotyped initial impressions and the female targets' actual behavior in the getting-acquainted conversations. In fact, for only 8 of these 13 measures is the difference between the behavior of the women in the attractive target condition in the same direction as the men's stereotyped initial impressions. This configuration is, of course, hardly different from the pattern expected by chance alone if there were no differences between the groups (exact binomial p = .29). Clearly, then, behavioral confirmation manifested itself only for those attributes that had defined the male perceivers' stereotype; that is, only in those domains where the men believed that there did exist links between physical attractiveness and personal attributes did the women come to behave differently as a consequence of the level of physical attractiveness that we had experimentally assigned to them.

Moreover, our understanding of the nature of the difference between the attractive target and the unattractive target conditions identified by our multivariate analysis of variance and our confidence in this demonstration of behavioral confirmation are bolstered by the consistent pattern of behavioral differences on the 14 additional related dependent measures. Our raters assigned to the female targets in the attractive target condition higher ratings on every question related to traversing-ness of self-presentation. Thus, for example, those who were thought by their perceivers to be physically attractive appeared to be the observer-judges to manifest greater confidence, greater affiliation, greater enjoyment of the conversation, and greater liking for their partners than those women who interacted with men who perceived them as physically unattractive.  

In Search of Mediators of Behavioral Confirmation

We next attempted to chart the process of behavioral confirmation. Specifically, we searched for evidence of the behavioral implications of the perceivers' stereotypes. Did the male perceivers present themselves differently to target women whom they assessed to be physically attractive or unattractive? Because we had 50 dependent measures of
PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR

The observer judged ratings of the males—12 more than the number of observations (male perceivers)—a multivariate analysis of variance is inappropriate. However, in 21 cases, multivariant analyses of variance did indicate differences between conditions (all p < .05). Men who interacted with women whom they believed to be physically attractive appeared (to the observer judges) more sociable, sexually warm, interesting, independent, sexually permissive, bold, whatever, humorous, obvious, and socially adept than their counterparts in the unattractive target condition. Moreover, these men were seen as more attractive, more confident, and more mature in their conversation than their counterparts. Further, they were considered by the observer judges to be more comfortable, to enjoy themselves more, to like their partners more, to take the initiative more often, to use their voices more effectively, to see their partners as more attractive and, finally, to be seen as more attractive by their partners than men in the unattractive target condition.

It appears, then, that differences in the level of sociability manifested and expressed by the male perceivers may have been a key factor in bringing out reciprocating patterns of conversation in the target women. One reason that targets who were in the attractive may have reciprocated the sociable overtures is that they regarded their partners' images of them as more accurate. P(1, 28) = 6.75, p < 0.02, and their interaction style to be more typical of the way they generally treated them. P(1, 28) = 4.79, p < 0.04, thus did women in the unattractive target condition. These individuals, perhaps, rejected their partners' treatment of them as representative and defensively adopted more cool and aloof posture to cope with their situations.

Discussion

What consequences are our social stereotypes? Our research suggests that stereotypes can and do channel dyadic interaction so as to create their own social reality. In our demonstration, pairs of individuals got acquainted with each other in a situation that allowed us to control the interaction, one member of the dyad (the perceiver) received about the physical attractiveness of the other person (the target). Our perceivers, in anticipation of interaction, fashioned erroneous images of their specific targets that reflected their general stereotypes about physical attractiveness. Moreover, our perceivers had very different patterns and styles of interaction for those when they perceived to be physically attractive and unattractive. These differences in self-presentation and interaction style, in turn, elicited and nurtured behaviors of the target that were consistent with the perceivers' initial stereotypes. Targets who were perceived (unknowingly to them) to be physically attractive actually came to behave in a friendly, likable, and sociable manner. The perceivers' attributions about their targets based upon their stereotyped intuitions about the world had initiated a process that produced behavioral confirmation of those attributions. The initially erroneous attributions of the perceivers had become real: The stereotype had truly functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lazarus, 1948).3

We regard our investigation as a particularly compelling demonstration of behavioral confirmation in social interaction. For if there is any social-psychological process that ought to exist in "stronger" form in everyday interaction than in the psychological laboratory,

8 The degrees of freedom for these analyses are fewer than those for earlier analyses because they were added to the experimental procedures after four dyads and participated in each condition.

9 Our research on behavioral confirmation in social interaction is a clear "conversational demonstration" of how people's expectations may influence others' behavior. Thus, Rosenblith (1974) and his colleagues have conducted an extensive program of laboratory and field observations of the effects of expectancies and teacher's expectations on the behavior of subjects in psychological laboratories and students in classrooms. Expectancies and the behavior of subjects produce patterns of performance from their subjects and pupils act in ways that selectively influence or shape those performances to confirm initial expectations (e.g., Rosenblith, 1974).
it is behavioral confirmation. In the context of years of social interaction in which perceivers have reacted to their actual physical attractiveness, our 10-minute getting-acquainted conversations over a telephone must seem minimal indeed. Nonetheless, the impact was sufficient to permit outside observers who had access only to one person's side of a conversation to detect manifestations of behavioral confirmation.

Might not other important and widespread social stereotypes—particularly those concerning sex, race, social class, and ethnicity—also channel social interaction so as to create their own social reality? For example, will the common stereotype that women are more conforming and less independent than men (cf. Brower, Vogel, Brower, Clarkson, & Rosenthal, 1972) influence interaction so that (within a procedural paradigm similar to ours) targets believed to be female will actually conform more, be more dependent, and be more successfully manipulated than interaction partners believed to be male? At least one empirical investigation has pointed to the possible self-fulfilling nature of apparent sex differences in self-presentation (Zanna & Pack, 1975).

Any self-fulfilling influences of social stereotypes may have compelling and pervasive societal consequences. Social observers have for decades commented on the ways in which stigmatized social groups and outsiders may fall "victim" to self-fulfilling cultural stereotypes (e.g., Becker, 1963; Goettman, 1963; Meron, 1948; Myrdal, 1944; Tannenbaum, 1958). Consider Scott's (1969) observations about the blind:

When, for example, sighted people continually insist that a blind man is helpless because he is blind, their subsequent treatment of him may preclude his even observing the kinds of skills that would enable him to be independent. It is in this sense that stereotypic worth is self-actualized. (p. 9)

And all too often it is the "victims" who are blamed for their own plight (cf. Ryan, 1971) rather than for the social expectations that have constrained their behavioral options.

Of what import is the behavioral confirmation process for our theoretical understanding of the nature of social perception? Although our empirical research has focused on social stereotypes that are widely accepted and broadly generalized, our notions of behavioral confirmation may apply equally well to idiosyncratic social perceptions spontaneously formed about specific individuals in the course of every day social interaction. In this sense, social psychologists have been wise to devote intense effort to understanding the processes by which impressions of others are formed. Social perceptions are important precisely because of their impact on social interaction. Yet, at the same time, research and theory in social perception (mostly displayed under the banner of attribution theory) that have focused on the manner in which individuals process information provided them to form impressions of others may underestimate the extent to which information received in actual social interaction is a product of the perceivers' own actions toward the target individual. More careful attention must clearly be paid to the ways in which perceivers create or construct the information that they process in addition to the ways in which they process that information. Every man in the social world may be as much the effects of our perceptions of those events as they are the causes of those perceptions.

From this perspective, it becomes easier to appreciate the perceivers' stubborn tendency to fashion images of others largely in trait terms (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1972), despite the poverty of evidence for the pervasive cross-situational consistencies in social behavior that the existence of "true" traits would demand (e.g., Michels, 1968). This tendency, dubbed by Ross (1977) as the "fundamental attribution error," may be a self-erasing error. For even though any target individual's behavior may lack, overall, the trait-defining properties of cross-situational consistency, the actions of the perceivers himself may produce consistency in the samples of behavior available to that perceiver. Our impressions of others may cause those others to behave in consistent trait-like fashion for us. In that sense, our trait-based impressions of others are vertical, even though the same individual may behave or be led to behave in a fashion perfectly consistent with opposite

Received December 6, 1976.