Negative traits have been shown to be particularly consequential (S. T. Fiske, 1980; J. G. Klein 1996; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). A strongly negative quality, such as wicked, is capable of completely dominating the impression we form of another person. This may be because we view this trait as highly important (as a weighted averaging model would predict) or because the negative quality alters the meaning we give to the person’s other qualities (as Asch’s change-of-meaning approach predicts).

5. Dealing with Inconsistent Information

Situations in which people confront contradictory information about others provide another testing ground for Asch’s theory. For example, imagine that we know a person who is peaceful and confrontational. How do we handle such apparent inconsistencies? According to Asch, we resolve the contradiction by altering the meaning of each trait.

A study by Asch and Zukier (1984) illustrates this process. During the first part of the study, participants were told to imagine a person who possessed two potentially conflicting personality traits. They were then asked to briefly describe the person, stating how the two attributes might be related. Table 4.6 shows that participants used a number of devices to resolve the inconsistencies and make the traits fit together.

C. Summary and Integration of the Impression Formation Process

In this section, we have reviewed different models of the impression formation process. Elemental models assume that we treat everything we know about a person as a separate piece of information and somehow combine this independent information to form an overall judgment. In contrast, Asch’s holistic model assumes that we strive to make sense of the people we meet by viewing the entire person as an interdependent, unified whole.