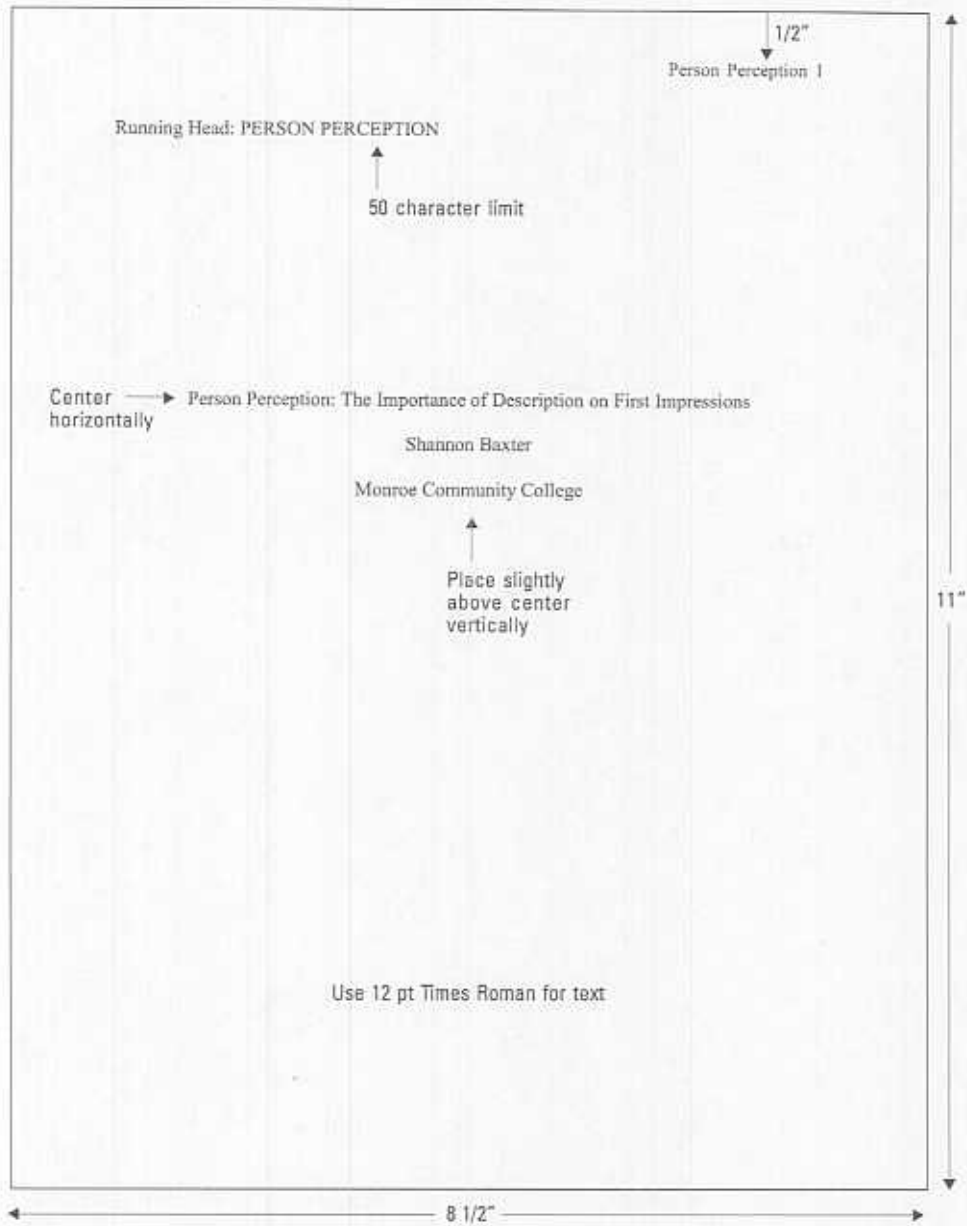
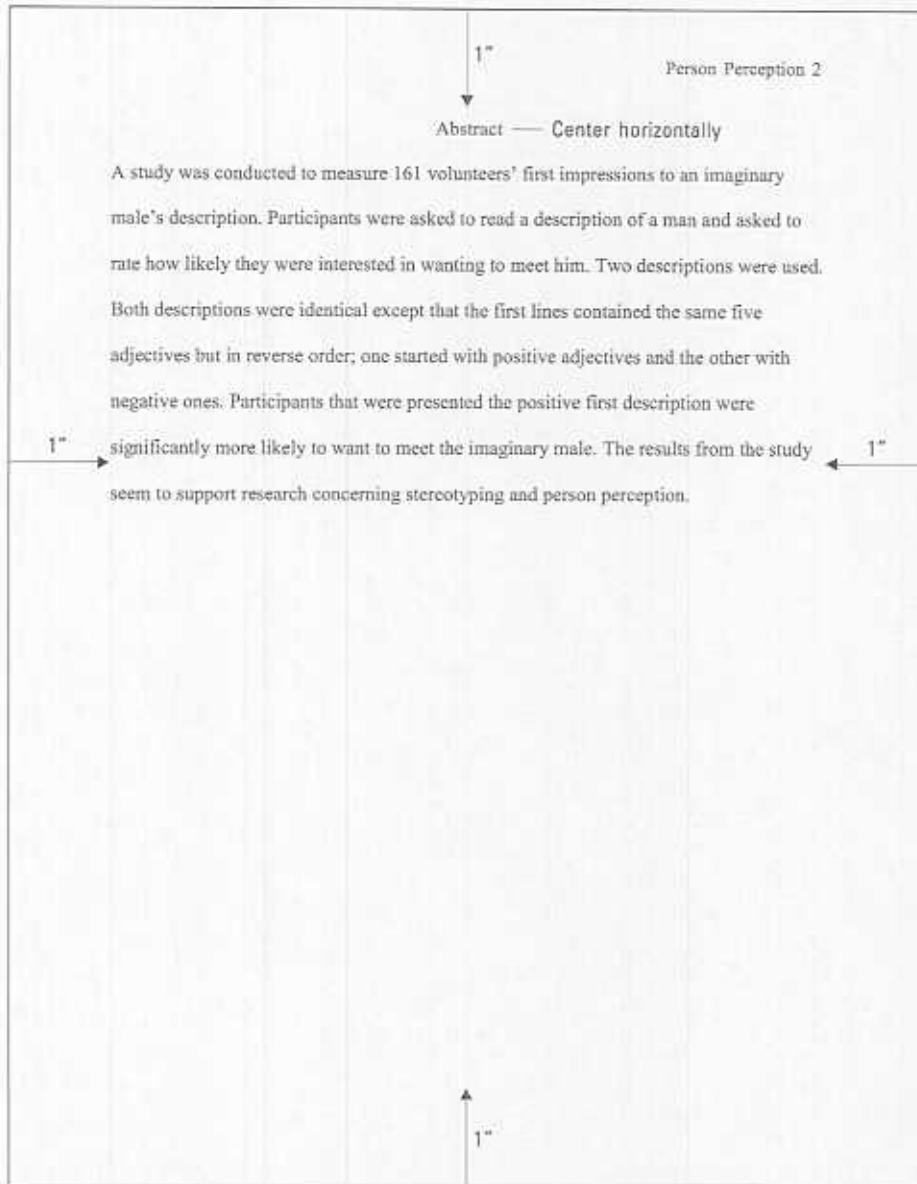


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Person Perception: The Importance of Description on First Impressions

People make judgments everyday about people they read about, see, and meet,

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Current research supports the idea that most of peoples' judgments concerning others are based on stereotyping and social categorizing. When learning or hearing about another person, individuals almost automatically and unconsciously start judging based on stereotypes (Chia & Jih, 1994; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001).

Some of the common aspects that people judge others on include appearance and personality traits. There are some well known biases that most people hold regarding appearance. One of these is the attractiveness bias where even the label attractive can make someone receive higher ratings on traits like friendliness and goodness than someone labeled unattractive, even without ever seeing either person (Stevenage & McKay, 1999). People are constantly judged by their clothes as well as their physical features. Someone who is dressed in older, dirty clothes is usually perceived as less credible than someone who is dressed more professionally, even by detectives who are trained to detect liars (Vrij, 1993). These judgments are primarily made automatically and vary based on personal experience and cultural background (Chia & Jih, 1994).

Stereotyping and categorizing is a cognitive process that helps people to make sense of the information they are introduced to everyday (Chia & Jih, 1994; Fisk, 2002; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Researchers have shown how people quickly judge others based on small amounts of information that seems to represent a stereotype without taking into consideration the whole picture of a person, sometimes leading to errors in making good judgments about the person (Fisk, 2002).

Person Perception 4

Another topic of interest in person perception is the idea of priming. When certain words, like hospital or librarian, are presented to someone, automatically other words or ideas are linked to those priming words (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). The priming word and the ideas that are associated with it can affect the way someone is stereotyped. Not much research has been done on the effects that priming words can have on how someone judges a person they have never met and how that judgment affects the possibility that someone would want to meet that person.

If priming and stereotyping can affect the way people think can it have an impact on wanting to meet an unknown person? If someone is introduced to another person and the first description of that person is positive, wouldn't they be more open to getting to know that person regardless of following descriptions as opposed to someone introduced with a description that started off negatively?

Method — Center level 1 heading

*Participants* — Italicize level 3 heading

A convenience sample of 161 people voluntarily took part in this study. The participants were people that were acquaintances of the experimenters. All participants had informed consent; they all were told that there would be no identifying information about them in the study, no names were collected or used. Also, following the study, they were all debriefed and told what the study was about.

*Procedure*

The participants were asked to read a description about a person. The description was of a man (M.H.); there were two versions of the description. Each version was identical except for the order of the words in the first line. The first line in each

description consisted of the exact same five words just in reverse order. One of the versions started with the positive description words ("honest," "curious"). The other version started with the negative description words ("short-tempered," "childish"). Both versions had "intelligent" as the third word and then either the negative or positive description words following intelligent. Eighty of the participants read the description that began with positive characteristics and eighty-one participants read the description that began with negative characteristics. After reading the description of M.H., the participants were asked, "how much they would like to meet and get to know M.H." The participants could rate their interest in meeting M.H. on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all, 3 being somewhat and 5 being very much. Participants were allowed to give half ratings (i.e. 3.5). After each person rated how much they would like to meet M.H. they were informed about what the study was for.

#### Results

Those that read the description beginning with positive characteristics were more likely to want to meet M.H. in comparison to those reading the negative first characteristics. The average rating from the positive first group was 3.2, and the average rating from the negative first group was 2.6. The differences in ratings between groups was statistically significant using a chi-square test (chi-square (4) = 10.33,  $p < .05$ ).

#### Discussion

The results from this study show that the order of the descriptive words had a significant impact on how much the participants wanted to meet M.H. Those that were given the description beginning with the positive words were more inclined to want to

Person Perception 6

meet M.H. whereas those that were given the description beginning with the negative words were less likely to want to meet him, even though the descriptions were otherwise identical. This shows the importance of the first information that is received when compared with later information.

The findings from our study were not much different from previous studies showing that stereotypical thinking colors people's judgments upon meeting, or, in this case, reading about someone. Our study may have some shortcomings considering we were utilizing a convenience sample and were not controlling for any variables. However, there were strong correlations between the order of the words and how likely a participant was to want to meet M.H.

A study where participants actually get to go on to meet M.H. in a controlled setting could have interesting results to see if there are differences in reactions towards him and if there are changes in opinions in first impressions after actual meeting instead of just reading about him.

Overall, it is important to see the connection between stereotypical thinking and the impact it has on interaction. Something as simple as the order of five words can change how people view a person.

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