

ROLE OF LEISURE BEHAVIOR IN PERSON PERCEPTION

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Introduction

The proposed paper describes a study of the influence of leisure behavior on person perception. An experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that people's confidence in their initial impressions of another person is greater when they perceive this individual to be engaged in leisure rather than work activities. The study of person perception or impression formation has a long history in social psychology. Most of our social interactions are guided by the impressions we form of other people, and often these impressions are formed on the basis of little or no direct experience with people. The things we learn about a particular individual sometimes comes from observation of his or her appearance and non-verbal communication. In other instances, the information we have about people comes from the information provided by others or the setting in which their behavior occurs. Research suggests that the beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes people have about these behaviors and/or settings can be potent influences on the impressions they form of others (Zebrowitz, 1990). With respect to leisure behavior and contexts, people appear to hold beliefs and stereotypes about the link between leisure behavior and personality. They tend to perceive their own leisure behavior to be freely chosen and intrinsically motivated and consequently more expressive of their personality than they do the obligated or rewarded activity in which they engage (e.g., Kelly, 1983; Shaw, 1985; Spreiter & Snyder, 1983). Consistent with this view, the types of activities in which people participate during leisure have been found to be more congruent with their personalities than those they engage in during their work (Emmons, Diener & Larsen, 1986). Our perceptions of other people are also influenced by their leisure behavior. Several studies (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Paluba & Neulinger, 1976; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1983) have found that people who participate in specific leisure activities may be perceived to have distinctive personality characteristics (e.g., a chess player is perceived as analytical and introverted). However, little research has been reported on these processes (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). In the present study, we theorized that the beliefs people hold about the connection between personality, self-expression and leisure behavior, particularly "the belief that people's leisure behavior is more expressive of who they are than is behavior in other domains of human activity" may not only influence the actual impressions they form of other people, but the *confidence* that they have in their impressions.

The present study examined this latter process. First, the hypothesis that people (observers) will have more confidence in their personality assessments of another person (target person) when they perceive that person to be engaged in leisure rather than work was tested. Second, observers' work and leisure attitudes, and the amount of freedom they characteristically feel their own leisure affords them were examined as possible moderating variables. It might be the case that people who are more positive about leisure, feel they have more freedom in leisure and people who are less enthralled with work are the ones likely to have greater confidence in their personality assessments of other people when they observe them involved in leisure compared to work. A third purpose of the study was to examine the cognitive processes that might link perceptions of leisure behavior and confidence in the impressions formed. The observer's perceptions of the extent to which a target person had freely chosen and was intrinsically motivated to participate in work and leisure activities were examined as mediating processes.

Method

One hundred and eighty-six university undergraduate students from a variety of programs and disciplines were recruited and volunteered to participate in this person perception study. Each

of the study participants was given a booklet containing four specially created photographs of either a male or female

target person engaged in four different activities (cooking, visiting a shopping mall, reading, and travelling by car). The activities depicted in the photographs were selected and the photographs taken so that it was unclear whether the person shown was involved in leisure or work. The perception of context (leisure or work) was manipulated by the instructions in the booklet read by the study participants and the labels "Work" or "Leisure" on the pages displaying the photographs. Work/leisure context was the independent variable. Subsequent pages in the booklet contained a variety of items and rating scales that were completed by the study participants. First, they were requested to assess the personality of the person in the photographs using a 15-item personality trait measure (Goldberg, 1992). No predictions were made for the impact of context on perceived personality characteristics. Respondents' confidence in their personality assessments was then measured with two items (e.g., "To what extent were you *confident* about your personality assessment of this person?"), followed by the measurement of their perceptions of the amount of freedom, expressiveness, fun and enjoyment the people in the pictures were experiencing. Next the study participants' leisure attitudes (Crandall & Slivkin, 1980), work ethic (Buchholz, 1978; modified version) and perceived freedom in leisure (Ellis & Witt, 1985) were measured. Finally, respondents' indicated their gender, age and program of study. Half of the study participants received booklets with female target persons depicted in the photographs and half with males depicted. Also, half the participants received booklets in which the activities depicted were described as leisure and half received booklets with the activities described as work. The booklets were distributed randomly to participants in small groups in a classroom setting. This arrangement resulted in a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial experimental design. The independent variables were context (work, leisure), gender of the study participant (female, male) and gender of the target person (female, male). The design allowed not only for the effect of the context on confidence in person perception to be examined, but it provided an opportunity to determine if the gender of the observer and the target person would interact to influence the person perception process.

Results

First, a three-way ANOVA was performed with context, observer gender and target gender serving as the independent variables and confidence in impressions (average of two confidence items) the dependent variable. Neither observer nor target person gender interacted with context to influence feelings of confidence. As expected, context had no influence on the observers' personality impressions of the targets ($p > .05$). Though the difference was in the predicted direction, context failed to have a significant influence on confidence ($p = .08$). To determine if the study participants' leisure attitudes, perceptions of freedom in leisure or work ethic modified or masked the influence of work/leisure context on confidence in personality assessments, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were carried out to examine the interaction between these factors and context. The interactions of the two leisure variables with context were not significant ($p > .05$). The interaction between context and work ethic, however, was highly significant ($p = .007$). When regression lines were plotted, it was found that those participants who saw work as less central in their lives were also the individuals who were more highly confident of their personality assessments of the target person engaged in "leisure" compared to "work." Those study participants for whom work was important and central to their lives had equal confidence in their personality assessments of target persons in work and leisure contexts.

To explore the cognitive processes underlying this relationship, the respondents were divided into two groups on the basis of a median split of their work ethic scores (low and high commitment to work). Structural equation modeling procedures were used to test the fit of a model that predicted that (1) observing a target person in a *leisure* compared to a *work* context will lead to perceptions that the target person's behavior was freely chosen and intrinsically motivated (i.e., the

behavior was *expressive of who they were* and was engaged for the fun *of it* and *enjoyment*) and (2) these perceptions of greater freedom and intrinsic motivation will result in greater observer confidence in the personality assessments made.

This model was tested separately for both the low and high commitment to work groups. The model fit the data extremely well for the low work commitment group (Chi-square = 6.19, $p = .19$; Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = .91). The influence of context on the observers' confidence in their personality assessments was fully mediated by the level of freedom and intrinsic motivation they perceived the target person in the photograph to have. The coefficients (betas) for the paths from the variable *context* to the latent variable representing the processes of *freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation*, and from this variable to the variable *observer confidence*, were .31 and .85 respectively ($p < .05$). However, as we would expect based on the interaction effect described earlier, the model did not fit the data well for the high work commitment group (Chi-square = 39.16, $p = .001$; Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = .75). The path coefficients for the path linking the *context* and *freedom of choice/intrinsic motivation* variables and the path linking this latter intervening variable and *observer confidence* were .04 and .30 respectively. While study participants who had a stronger commitment to work tended to have more confidence in their personality assessments of the person in the photographs when they perceived that person's behavior as freely chosen and intrinsically motivated, the context (work or leisure) did not influence these latter perceptions.

Conclusions

Qualified support was found for the hypothesis that observers' will have more confidence in their first impressions of people who are engaged in leisure rather than work activity. Support is qualified because this link was found only for observers for whom work was less important and central in their lives. Both observers with low and high work commitment had more confidence in their personality assessments when they perceived the target person's behavior to be freely chosen and intrinsically motivated. However, those observers with a higher commitment to work did not perceive the leisure behavior of the target persons to be more freely chosen and intrinsically motivated than these individuals' work behavior. These perceptions or beliefs about leisure and work can be thought of as *scripts*. Scripts are generalized representations of common events that tell us what we can expect of other people's behavior in various social situations and what motivates them (Abelson, 1981). Those students who saw work as more important and central to their lives likely had scripts that did not distinguish between work and leisure in terms of freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation.

The present study extends the limited theory and research on person perception and leisure. Not only can the personality images associated with various leisure activities influence our perceptions of the people involved in these activities, but some people have more confidence in their impressions when they see these people involved in leisure as compared to work activity. Future research needs to replicate these findings, identify other moderating variables and explore how leisure scripts develop and influence our actual behavior and reactions to others.

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