CHAPTER 23

LABELING: THE NEED FOR GREATER PERSON-ENVIRONMENT INDIVIDUATION

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The problem of labeling will always be a problem. This assertion embraces two quite different meanings of the word problem. In the first instance, the problem refers to perplexing questions proposed for investigation and academic discussion. In the second instance, the reference is to problems that add to disadvantage ment caused by negative labeling. This chapter concerns both types of "problems" and concludes with specific recommendations for at least mitigating the serious affronts to human dignity and potential that can be created by a label.

The relevant literature is vast. It ranges over work on impression formation (interpersonal perception), prejudice (attitudes), discrimination (behavior), deviancy (societal edicts), ethnocentrism (ingroup vs. outgroup), semantics and semiotics (meaning of speech and symbols), labels (identity, diagnosis), and stereotypes (beliefs). Even research on categorizing objects (object perception) is relevant. The present chapter does not review this literature as a whole, but does draw on theory and research in making a case for its primary theme—namely, that the current focus in clinical diagnosis on labeling problem behavior must be broadened by a lens that also sharply focuses on positive personal characteristics as well as on environmental factors for diagnostic and treatment purposes. Such a mission might seem disheartening in that it requires greater cognitive complexity, not less. Yet, broadening the diagnostic lens is crucial if two system concepts—whole person and behavior as a function of person in interaction with environment—are to be taken seriously (Lewin, 1935). Anything short of this does a disservice to remediation potential and personal integrity.

LABELING, DISTINCTIVENESS, AND DEINDIVIDUATION

To label is to give a name to things grouped together according to a shared characteristic(s). Because labels stand for something, they are abstractions. They occur naturally and are necessary. They serve to organize and simplify the world, to make it seemingly more understandable. For labeling purposes, differences among members of
the labeled group are secondary, if not unimportant, so long as they do not violate the rules of inclusion. Thus, the label "American" or the label "fruit" encompasses an enormous diversity within each of these categories.

Grouping and labeling also require differentiating an outgroup. "American" and "fruit" are communicable labels because there are other people and edibles that are excluded from these classifications. It can be expected, therefore, that labeling groups leads to a muting of perceived within-group differences and a highlighting of perceived between-group differences. Such muting and highlighting of differences have received considerable support in a variety of laboratory studies. Two experiments are described here: one involves objects and the other, people. They were selected to underscore the fact that the process of grouping (labeling, categorizing) involves basic dynamic properties regardless of whether the grouping is of people or objects.

In the first experiment (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963), research participants were shown a series of eight lines whose lengths differed from each other by a constant ratio. In one condition, the letter A appeared above each of the four shorter lines and the letter B above each of the four longer lines. In other conditions, the four A's and the four B's were either attached to the lines indiscriminately or did not appear. The participants estimated the length of the lines in random order. The results indicated that lines belonging to the two systematically labeled classes A and B were judged as farther apart in length than in the unclassified or haphazardly classified conditions. Moreover, the repeated experience of estimating the lines in successive trials led to an increase in the judged similarity of stimuli belonging to the same systematically labeled class, as compared with the other two conditions. In short, the participants tended to overestimate differences in adjacent lines across categories A and B, but to underestimate differences in length within the categories.

The second experiment concerns social perception (Doise, Deschamps, & Meyer, 1978). The research participants were asked to describe photographs of children using a list of trait adjectives. There were two conditions. In one condition, the participants were presented with six photographs at one time, grouped according to sex (three boys, three girls), and described each photograph. In the second condition, the research participants were initially presented with only three same-sex photographs (boys or girls) to describe. Following that, they were shown the three photographs of the other sex to describe. Thus, these participants did not know in advance that they would rate photographs of both sexes, whereas the participants in the first condition realized this from the beginning. The results indicated that those participants who had the two sexes in mind at the outset tended to perceive smaller intrasex differences and larger intersex differences than participants who did not anticipate rating photographs of the other sex.

The two experiments demonstrate that the perception of within-group differences tend to be diminished, whereas between-group differences tend to be exaggerated. Another way to put this is that group members tend to be perceived as more similar to each other and more dissimilar to out-group members than when they remain as unclassified objects or individuals.

A different type of evidence for within-group deindividuation (attenuation of differences) emerges when "the stream of behavior" of group members is divided into meaningful units. Wilder (1984) took advantage of the idea that behavior, rather than being perceived as a continuous stream, is "chunked" in order to impart meaning (Barker & Wright, 1955; Barker, 1963). He reasoned that behavior would be divided into larger chunks when the person is viewed as a member of a group rather than as an individual. In the experiment, research participants were asked to divide the videotaped behaviors of one of four people into meaningful action units. In the group condition, the four people were identified as a group, whereas in the non-group condition they were described as having come together by chance. The results showed that subjects chunked the behavior of group members into fewer meaningful units than when the people were seen as aggregates of individuals. The inference is that the behavior of an individual who is perceived as a member of a group is less informative.

Deindividuation has other consequences. Experiments have shown that the beliefs as well as the behavior of people perceived as members of a group tend to be seen as more similar than in the case of people viewed as individuals (Wilder, 1978). Also, more information that is consistent than inconsistent with the group label will tend to be remembered. In one study, for example, more "librarianlike" behavior was recalled about the person when she was presented as a librarian than
as a waitress (Cohen, 1981). For further research on the implications of the categorization process, the reviews by Tajfel (1978) and by Wilder (1986) are recommended.

What needs to be emphasized is that human perception is coerced by the mere act of grouping things together. Within-group attenuation and between-group accentuation of differences is a product of categorization and may well be a general law that operates in the case of classification of both objects and people. Moreover, inasmuch as labeling serves to identify group membership, the mere act of labeling leads to both deindividuation of group members and accentuation of differences with outgroups. Such coercion poses an enormous challenge to psychology, whether with respect to clinical practice or research. Fundamental questions surface: Does deindividuation have negative consequences? When, what are they, and for whom? What are the costs of emphasizing distinctiveness between groups? If differences are accentuated, what happens to the similarities between groups? And where is the environment in all this? The challenge to psychology will be explored further and partial solutions formulated in the remainder of this chapter.

LABELING AND THE FUNDAMENTAL NEGATIVE BIAS

The discussion thus far has dealt with the effects of perceiving something as a member of a group (category, class of things) regardless of whether the affixed label is neutral or evokes a value-laden train of thought. But labels that identify group memberships of people (or of objects for that matter) are usually not neutral, but instead signal positive or negative evaluations. These value differentials, as compared with "neutral" categories, have been shown to enhance still further perceived similarities within categories and perceived differences between categories (Tajfel, 1978, p. 62), thereby compounding the problem of within-group deindividuation.

Basic Proposition

The basic proposition of the fundamental negative bias involves the concepts of saliency, value, and context (Wright, 1988). (a) If something stands out sufficiently (saliency), and (b) if, for whatever reason, it is regarded as negative (value), and (c) if its context is vague or sparse (context), then the negative value of the object of observation will be a major factor in guiding perception, thinking, and feeling to fit its negative character.

This proposition has a parallel in the positive side of bias; namely, where something is perceived as salient, positive, and in a sparse context, then positvity will be a major factor in guiding subsequent cognitive-affective events. Because the fundamental negative bias contributes so insidiously to prejudice and disadvantage, the focus is on this bias in the following discussion.

That the affective value of something, in the absence of countering contextual factors, can become a potent force in influencing what a person thinks about and feels can be understood in terms of the concept of similarity as a unit-forming factor (Heider, 1958; Wertheimer, 1923). Similarity between entities, be they external objects or intrapsychic events, is a powerful factor in perceiving them as a unit; that is, as belonging together. An especially salient type of similarity among entities is their affective quality. Things that are positive are alike in engendering a force toward them; negative things, a force away from them. Combining positive and negative qualities subjects the person to forces opposite in direction.

Experiments on Context

External Context

Context refers to the set of conditions within which something is perceived and that influences that thing’s meaning. The context can refer to conditions external to the perceiver or to intrapsychic predispositions of various sorts. A few experiments bearing on the significance of external context with regard to the fundamental bias are presented below.

In an important yet simple experiment, reactions to the label “blindness” as compared with “blind people,” and “physical handicap” as compared with “physically handicapped people” were examined (Whiteman & Lukoff, 1965). That the condition itself was evaluated far more negatively than were people with the condition is not surprising. Still, the question remains as to how to account for the difference. The explanation can be found in the fundamental negative bias. Blindness, the salient condition, generally is valued negatively. When no context existed to alter its meaning, its negativity guided the reaction accordingly. When, however, the positive concept
“person” was added, a context was provided that moderated the dominant position of the negative condition. It was the context that in effect changed the concept to be rated. And that is just the point. Contexts bring about diverse structures of meaning. The classical work of Asch (1952), which clearly demonstrated the importance of context in perception of people, should be especially noted.

The context can be positive or negative. In the above example, the concept of “person” provided a positive context and therefore constrained the negative spread. Research also has shown that, as the positive character of the context becomes even more salient, attitudes become more favorable. This was demonstrated, for example, in an experiment in which attitudes toward a person who was labeled with a particular problem (e.g., former mental patient, amputee) became more positive when that person was described as functioning adequately than when the negative label stood alone (Jaffe, 1966).

If a positive context can constrain negative evaluation, we might surmise that a negative context could increase the negativity of the object of observation, thereby adding to the grip of the fundamental negative bias in controlling attitudes. Thus, in one experiment attitudes toward a person described as physically disabled and as having undesirable personality traits tended to be more negative than toward a comparably described, able-bodied person (Leek, 1966). Such intensified reactions also have been demonstrated with respect to race (Dienstbier, 1970) and people with mental disorders (Gergen & Jones, 1963).

Besides affecting the processing of information presented about a person, the fundamental negative bias also influences information sought about a person. This was demonstrated in a study specifically designed to explore implications of the fundamental negative bias (Pierce, 1987). The research participants, simulating the role of a counselor, were asked what they would like to know about a client. The client was either identified as just having been released from a psychiatric ward (salient negative) or as just having graduated from college (salient positive). In both cases, she was further described as seeking help because she was “feeling somewhat anxious and uncertain about her future, including a job and other issues in her life.” The subjects selected 24 items of information they would like to know about Joan, the client, from a list of 68 items, half of which referred to something positive (e.g., “Is Joan intelligent?”) and half to something negative (e.g., “Is Joan cruel?”). Significantly more negative items were selected in the case of the former psychiatric patient than the college graduate, apparently reflecting the belief that the negative information would be more relevant. Although there may be some bias in fact for this belief, the differential preference for negatives in the two cases poses a particular challenge for those who believe in the importance of calling special attention to positive personal traits. Bear in mind that the only revealed difference between the clients was identification as former psychiatric patient versus college graduate. Parenthetically, the subjects also rated Joan, as they believed the helping agency would, less positively in the former case.

The meaning of external context should be clarified. External context is not limited to a network of externally presented personal attributes but includes the external situation as well. The fact that the meaning of observations can be altered by the situation in which person perception takes place is well known. In the above study (Pierce, 1987), two simulated situations were compared. One was that of a counseling center that “seeks out the strengths and assets of people”; the other was a psychological clinic that “deals with the emotional and behavioral problems of people.” When the client was identified as attending a psychological clinic, whether as a former mental patient or as a college student, the research participants checked significantly more negative-information items that would be sought by the agency and the client was evaluated less positively than when she was identified as attending a counseling center. In this experiment, the orienting function of the helping agency (the external situational context) played an important role in determining the affective course that cognition would take.

Research on the effect of being helped on the recipient’s liking for the help-giver provides a different type of example of the context effect of situations on affect. It has been shown that whereas a decrease in liking for the helper occurs under specified conditions when the recipient and donor of the help are working independently, there is an increase under the same set of conditions when the two are interdependent (e.g., members of the same team; Cook & Pelfrey, 1985). Of interest is the fact that the increase in liking holds even though the helper is the object of the recipient’s racial prejudice.
Intrapsychic Context

In addition to conditions externally imposed, factors internal to the person also can provide the main context for influencing perception. A variety of personal dispositions, such as personality traits and values, are potentially important in this regard. With respect to the fundamental negative bias, it is known that people who are more ethnocentric are more likely to view minority group members negatively than people who are less ethnocentric (English, 1971a, 1971b). This personality trait could provide the kind of internal context that maximizes the saliency of any negative attribute presented by the external stimulus conditions of an outgroup; it could even have the power to lead the perceiver to ignore positive attributes. The same line of reasoning holds for values. It seems plausible that a strong value placed on human dignity, for example, would have the potential to exert a significant influence in organizing perception in a way that forestalls the fundamental negative bias.

Motivation should be mentioned as still another potentially important internal factor that can affect the potency of the fundamental negative bias. For example, the evaluator might benefit in some way by devaluing another, as when there is a need to feel superior. Such a motive could easily reinforce the fundamental negative bias, even to the extent of discrediting what would ordinarily be regarded as positive aspects of the other person. The converse is also true. Thus, humanistic and religious concerns could be a motivating force that creates a positive context of beliefs and principles in which to view people. There are a few examples of personal dispositions that conceivably support or compete with the power of the fundamental negative bias. The reader will be able to think of others.

Insider Versus Outsider Perspectives

The contrasting viewpoints of the insider and outsider corral a different set of context conditions in terms of which judgments are made (Dembo, 1964, 1970). The insider (also referred to as “actor”) is the person experiencing his or her own behavior, feelings, or problems. The outsider is the person observing or evaluating someone else. Both clinicians and researchers are outsiders with respect to the views of the clients and subjects they are studying. Several types of investigations involving insider-outsider perspectives are described later.

Research on the mine-thine problem is especially revealing because the research participant is placed in the position of both insider and outside-observer as he or she engages the assigned task (Wright, 1983). A simple way to conduct the experiment is to ask participants to list the initials of five people they know well in one column and beside each initial to indicate that person's worst handicap (limitation, shortcoming, disability, or problem). Then, next to each of the five handicaps they are asked to write what they regard as their own worst handicap. They are then asked to circle the one from each pair they would choose for themselves if they had a choice. Next, they write two numbers on a slip of paper to indicate the number of times their own and the others' worst handicaps were chosen, the sum of the two normally being five. These slips are then collected so that the number frequencies can be displayed and discussed.

The results are dramatic and consistent. The number of times one's own handicap or problem is reclaimed clearly exceeds the frequency of choosing the others'. Among the five choices, it is common for subjects to select their own handicap five, four, or three times—rarely less frequently.

The difference between what is taken into account by the insider and outsider becomes appreciated in a personally direct way in the group's attempt to explain the results. Explanations include the following: they are used to their own handicap (familiarity); they have learned how to deal with it (coping); it is a part of the self and one's history (self-identity). Keep in mind that the subject is an insider when considering his or her own handicap, and an outsider when regarding the other person's. Consequently, the other person's handicap more or less stands alone as a labeled negative condition and is therefore perceptually more insulated from context factors that could check the spread of its negative effect.

Other investigations have shown that patients (the insiders) tend to have a more positive outlook than do others viewing their situation (Hamara & Shontz, 1978; Mason & Muhlencamp, 1976). Still other research has shown that mental hospital patients, mothers on welfare, and clients at a rehabilitation center (i.e., the insiders) tend to rate themselves as above average in how fortunate they are, whereas people viewing their situation from the outside judge them to be below average.
(Wright & Howe, 1969). This phenomenon, known as the “fortune phenomenon,” was first noted by Dembo, Leviton, and Wright (1956/1975).

To my knowledge, all research bearing on the perspectives of insiders and outsiders shows not only that the meaning of the experience or label differs, but also that insiders are generally more inclined than outsiders to take into account positives in their troubling situations. It seems clear that the context in which the judgments are made differs greatly in the two cases. Insiders place the significance of the problem in a life context so that the span of realities connected with it is wide. Only some aspects are negative; others are clearly positive (e.g., coping, identity), and it is this broad context that restrains the spread of negative effects. On the other hand, to outsiders the other person’s problem more or less tends to stand alone, especially when it is represented by a label. In this case, the context is sparse or simplified and the negativity of the problem dominates the train of thought.

Relative Potency of Positives Versus Negatives

The problem of context raises the question of the relative potency of positive and negative attributes. There is strong and accumulating evidence that under many conditions people tend to weigh negative aspects more heavily than positive aspects (Kanouse & Hanson, 1971). The following experiment is illustrative (Feldman, 1966). Research participants rated each of 25 statements containing a different adjective to describe the person, given the context “He is a [e.g., wise] man.” A nine-point rating scale was used ranging from good to bad. The participants also rated the statement when it included both a positive and a negative adjective (e.g., wise and corrupt). The potency of each adjective was determined by comparing the ratings of the statement when the adjective was used alone and when it appeared as a pair. The results were clear. The most powerful trait-adjacatives were negative. That is, overall ratings of people described by both a positive and negative label were more negative than would be predicted by simply averaging the scale values assigned to each used singly.

The study previously described on the fundamental negative bias (Pierce, 1987) also offers evidence concerning the potency-value of negatives. You will recall that in that study, subjects sought information about a client from the perspective of a counseling center that focused on strengths and assets, or a psychological clinic that focused on emotional and behavior problems. At the end of the experiment, the subjects were asked to write an essay expressing their views as to whether the kind of information sought about the client would have been different had the client gone to the alternate agency for help (the psychological clinic in the case of the client at the counseling center, and vice versa). Whereas none of the subjects spontaneously indicated that the problem-oriented psychological clinic would have been less adequate than the counseling center to meet the client’s needs, some subjects questioned whether a stress-focus agency could help the client resolve her problems even though she might feel better about herself for a short while.

Several explanations of the greater potency (weight) given to negatives than positives have been proposed. First, negative information may become more salient because if arouses vigilance. Also, negative experiences do not “let go” of the person; the person ruminates about them, thereby increasing their presence and potency. Moreover, the norms of society are positive. Any negative deviation stands out and is given added weight because of its normative violation. Another explanation for the disproportionate weight given to negative attributes is that they are more likely to reduce or cancel the value of positive attributes than vice versa. Finally, it has been suggested (Kogan & Wallach, 1967) that the special salience of negatives may have a physiological basis insofar as evidence exists for the relative independence of reward and punishment systems in the brain. These separate systems may have evolved in the Darwinian sense, producing approach and avoidance tendencies of unequal strength.

The greater potency of negatives, however, should not be taken to mean that negatives facilitate a broader, more flexible, or more integrated organization of cognitive material. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that positive affect is superior in this regard. For example, a variety of studies have shown that both positive affect and positive material cues a wider range of associations than negative material (Isen, 1987). This point is especially relevant when considering action to change matters for the better, as in the case of treatment settings. A further point needs to be emphasized; namely, that the added potency of
LABELING AND NEGLECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Thus far, the discussion has dealt with the general effects of grouping people and objects by some labeling device and the effects when the label connotes something negative. The results indicate that within-group deindividuation and between-group accentuation of differences tend to occur. The results also indicate that when a label is both negative and salient within a sparse context, it tends to invite more negative associations than when the context is expanded to include positive aspects. Furthermore, the negative preoccupation is exacerbated by the added weight ordinarily given to negatives. The point was stressed that the negative preoccupation can be checked by embedding the label in a cognitive-affective context (external/intrapyschic) that alters the significance of the label. Now let us turn our attention to the obscurity of the environment in the labeling process.

Person and Environment as Figure and Ground

We begin with the observation that frequently people are labeled (grouped) solely by personal attributes: race, gender, age, intellectual level, physical condition, emotional status, and so forth. These attributes describe the person, not the environment. Even in cases where the label alludes to a particular environment, the label is generally interpreted as providing information about the person. Thus, such labels as mental hospital patients, rehabilitation clients, librarians, prisoners, and third-graders essentially define the kind of person one is referring to, not the kind of environment. The label directs attention to patients, not hospitals; prisoners, not prisons; librarians, not libraries. At best, the environment remains as a vague background against which the person is featured.

The prominence of the person as figure and the vagueness of the environment is further supported by the nature of environments and people. People are active, moving in space, commanding attention by their behavior. Environments are less visible when perceiving persons and therefore less apprehendable. The environment provides the medium that allows the person to act, just as sound waves are the medium that allows the person to hear (Heider, 1926). In both cases, the sound heard and the person behaving are more easily apprehended than the mediating conditions. Unless the environment stands out because it is the object of study (in ecology, for example), or because of some commanding event, as when an earthquake strikes (physical environment), or a child is sexually abused (social environment), the environment remains hidden in thinking about and evaluating a person.

An additional factor contributing to the saliency of the person and the eclipse of the environment is that the person and his or her behavior are tied together by proximity; that is, the person is present whenever the behavior occurs. Proximity, like similarity, has long been recognized as a unifying factor. Thus, closeness in time and space between person and behavior creates a strong force toward accounting for the person's behavior in terms of properties of the person to the neglect of the environment. Even the expression "the person's behavior" uses the possessive case to tie the behavior to the person and not to the environment. Moreover, as the person moves from place to place, the constancy is the person, not the environment. Small wonder, then, that in thinking about a person, personal attributes override environmental considerations.

Causal Attribution

Major consequences for seeking and understanding the causes of behavior follow from the figure-ground relationship between person and environment. Despite the fact that most people would agree that both physical and social environments affect behavior, the role of the environment is easily neglected just because of its obscurity. The aforementioned study of information sought about a client bears on this point (Pierce, 1987). When the research participants were asked to indicate which of the initial pool of about 100 information items were irrelevant to the problems presented, a much larger percentage of environmental than person-attribute items were so judged (77% vs. 17%), this in spite of the fact that these items were not trivial ones. They touched on crime, pollution, standard of living, and educa-
tion—environmental areas that clearly could be considered significant.

Additional factors affecting the relative saliency of person and environment in causal attribution are discussed below; namely, insider versus outsider perspectives, covariation, just world phenomenon, focal task, and values and motivation.

**Insider Versus Outsider Perspectives**

The difference in the two perspectives was introduced in connection with the fundamental negative bias where it was shown that the insider is relatively more inclined than the outsider to take positives in a troubling situation into account. Now let us examine how the two perspectives influence the saliency of person versus environment and therefore causal attribution.

The overall conclusion, based on several lines of investigation, is that the insider is more apt than the outsider to attribute his or her own behavior to properties of the environment, whereas the outsider relatively more frequently sees the other person's traits as the source of the behavior (Goldberg, 1978). This general result is nicely shown in an experiment in which the research participants were asked to describe five people, including themselves, by selecting from each of 20 pairs of trait opposites (e.g., energetic vs. relaxed) the trait that most nearly applied to the person, or by checking the alternative option, "depends on the situation" (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973). The participants more frequently checked "depends on the situation" when describing themselves (the insider) than when they were in the position of observers describing someone else (e.g., best friend, peer acquaintance).

A second study demonstrated that the weight given to person and environment depends on the focus of attention of the insider and outsider (Storms, 1973). In this experiment, the focus of the insider's attention was shifted to approximate the visual focus of an observer. There were two parts to this experiment. Part 1 was a live situation in which two participants conversed with each other. This session was videotaped with separate cameras focused on each of the conversants. In part 2, each member of the dyad watched the videotape that had been focused on himself or herself, thereby assuming the visual vantage point of an outsider observer.

In both the live and video situations, the participants indicated the degree to which they felt their own behavior (how friendly, talkative, nervous, and domineering they were) was affected (a) by their own personality, and (b) by the nature of the situation (e.g., other person's behavior). In the live situation, the subjects as insiders attributed their behavior significantly more frequently to the environment than in the videotape situation where their visual attention approximated that of an observer. It also should be pointed out that in this experiment, as well as the preceding one in which five persons were rated, the research participants attributed their own behavior to personal traits more frequently than to the situation whether or not they were in the position of insiders or outside observers. This is because behavior still remains "attached to the person” even when the person is the insider, although in this position the person is more sensitive to the environment than when in the position of an outsider.

In a third study, the insider and outsider roles were simulated (Snyder, Shenkel, & Schmidt, 1976). Research participants assumed the role of counselor (outsider) or client (insider) as they listened to a taped therapy interview ostensibly of a client who was either seen for the first time or who was chronic (in counseling five different times). In the interview, the client asserted that her situation caused her problems. Once again, the problems of the client were seen as significantly more personality based when the ratings were made from the point of view of the counselor than of the client, a difference that held in the case of both the first-time and chronic client.

**Covariation**

The perception of "what varies with what" is a powerful factor in the determination of causes (Kelley, 1973). That is, where behavior is perceived to vary with the person, explanation is sought in terms of personal attributes. Where behavior is seen to vary with the situation, characteristics of the situation are held accountable. It is now proposed that because of the saliency of the person in understanding a person's behavior, the attributes of the person initially become the arena for the explanatory search (Wright, 1983). Only when this probe proves unrewarding is the search expanded to include the environment.

As an illustration, consider the difference in attribution outcome when the behavior under scrutiny is atypical or typical. In his classical work, Heider (1958) pointed out, "If we know that only
one person succeeded or only one person failed out of a large number in a certain endeavor, then we shall ascribe success or failure to this person— to his great ability or to his lack of ability. On the other hand, if we know that practically everyone who tries, succeeds, we shall attribute the success to the task.” (p. 89). We then say that the task was easy, or in the case of general failure, that the task was hard.

The inferential process in the two cases can be described as follows. The judgment that a particular behavior is typical or deviant requires comparing the behavior of people at the start, simply because behavior is “tied to” people. At this stage, the environment does not enter. If an adequate explanation of the behavior can be found in person characteristics, person attribution takes place. In the interest of parsimony, the explanatory process then stops because there is no felt need to seek further explanation by examining the environment. It is only when cogent personal characteristics do not readily surface that the need to explain shifts attention to the environment, thus ushering in an additional stage in the inferential process.

It is further proposed that in the case of atypical behavior, personal characteristics more readily emerge than in the case of typical behavior. It is relatively easy to account for a child’s inattentiveness, for example, in terms of presumed hyperactivity, mental retardation, or some other characteristic of the child when most children are able to attend to the task. With such closure in the attribution search, there is no need to pursue the matter further by inquiring about possible contributing situational factors, such as class size or home difficulties. There is even no felt need to ask whether the child is inattentive in other situations, such as on the playground. In short, the atypical behavior is seen to covary with the person, not with the situation. Research has shown that a person-based attribution of behavior correlates significantly and positively with the perceived degree of the person’s maladjustment (Snyder, 1977).

In the case of typical behavior, however, the course of events often takes a different turn. Consider the case where almost all members of a classroom are inattentive. It is not ordinarily concluded that the class is hyperactive or mentally retarded or delinquent. An observer would tend to reserve such judgment for special classes of labeled children. Instead, the teacher’s skill in keeping order might be questioned or the overcrowded classroom noted. These probes enlarge the causal network to include the situation. Thus, when the search for personal traits is not adequate to the task of accounting for common behavior, the perceiver moves to the next possible explanatory source—the situation.

Apparently, once attention is directed to the situation, other situations are drawn into the comparative process. If an observer holds overcrowding accountable for the inattentiveness, it is because the inattentiveness is felt to contrast with behavior in less crowded classes. Similarly, behavior typical at a tennis match is ascribed to the nature of the situation, only because the behavior is understood to change with the situation. The side-to-side head-turning occurs when the ball is volleyed from court to court, not during interludes; or it occurs at tennis matches, not at concerts. However, if a few individuals were observed engaged in “nontennis”-oriented activity, the behavior would likely be attributed to boredom or some other personal attribute.

The covariation process described above is particularly threatening to minority groups, however they are labeled (e.g., mentally ill, disabled, etc.). This is because once they and their behavior are identified as atypical—nonnormative, deviant—the covariation process captures many seemingly plausible personal traits in its causal net, thereby aborting the causal search. The result is that environmental considerations are effectively screened out.

**The Just World Phenomenon**

A third factor in causal attribution involves consideration of both reality and what ought to be. Theory and research support the idea that human beings are inclined to feel that suffering and punishment, like joys and rewards, should be deserved (Asch, 1952; Heider, 1958). This sentiment is aptly referred to as the “just world phenomenon” (Lerner, 1970). Belief in a just world can be maintained by blaming the victim. This has been shown in a series of laboratory experiments summarized by Lerner (1970). Blaming is manifested when the suffering is viewed as a consequence or punishment of some form of sin, wrongdoing or irresponsibility. Because of the need to bring “ought” and “reality” into balance, the poor tend to be blamed for their poverty and the person who is raped is blamed for the rape.

A scale has been developed to measure individual differences concerning belief in a just world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Results indicate that be-
lievers are more likely to admire fortunate people and derogate victims than nonbelievers, thus maintaining the notion that people in fact get what they deserve.

To be sure, "ought and reality" can be aligned by altering reality to fit what ought to be. Such is the goal of reformers and activists whose efforts are directed at environmental change (legal, political, social, economic). Yet, as we have seen, because it is the suffering of a person (or people) that is being explained, the focus quite naturally becomes the person, not the environment. It takes a broader view to be able to scan other situations and to recognize the possible covariation between suffering and situations.

Although the just world phenomenon applies equally to advantaged and disadvantaged groups, it adds to the problems of those who are already burdened. Whenever the suffering is justified by perceiving the person as its main cause, possible environmental circumstances are overlooked.

**Task Focus**

The explanatory search in understanding behavior also is guided by the task undertaken by the investigator. Where the task is to form an impression of the person, to understand the person's behavior, to characterize the person in terms of descriptions, labels, or diagnoses, the task itself directs the perceiver's attention to the person.

However, where the task is to describe the environment in which people function, the focus of attention shifts to families, homes and schools, neighborhoods and parks, places of work and worship, and so forth. A vocabulary then emerges to describe and label the characteristics of situations that influence behavior (Stokols & Altman, 1987). Ecological Psychology is one representative of this focus (Barker, 1963; Schoggen, 1989). Its vocabulary includes such phrases as behavior settings; penetration, which refers to the power of different functional positions in the setting; and action patterns, which refers to the human needs to which settings cater. Another representative of systematic environmental attention is behavior modification approaches that focus on the connection between environmental contingencies and the reinforcement and extinction of behavior. Terms used are schedules of reinforcement, discriminative stimuli, chaining, and conditioned reinforcers. More global reference to environments includes such descriptive terms as urban, rural, ghetto, integrated, autocratic, democratic, permissive, sympathetic, violent, and so forth.

The focus of helping agencies varies. Some concentrate on changing the person's situation, as is the case of social service and employment agencies. Others focus on changing the person: schools and treatment centers are examples. People are referred to one or another agency according to whether the problem is seen to be intrinsic to the person or to the environment.

Thus, the perceived source of difficulties critically affects referral decisions. This was clearly shown in an experiment in which participants, serving as counselors in a simulated referral agency, assigned clients to one or another agency after learning of the problem (Batson, 1975). When the client's situation was held primarily accountable for the problem, referrals were more likely to be directed to social service agencies than to institutions oriented toward changing the person, whereas the reverse was true when the problem was judged to reside in the client.

Where the primary mission of a treatment center is to change the person, assessment procedures will be directed toward describing and labeling person attributes. The danger is that the environment scarcely enters the equation in understanding behavior.

**Other Factors in Neglect of Environmental Considerations**

Just as intrapsychic factors were mentioned as supporting or diminishing the power of the fundamental negative bias, so do these factors need to be recognized in the mix of factors that influence the figure-ground relationship between person and environment. The ideology of rugged-individualism, for example, focuses on the person as the responsible agent. On the other hand, values and ideology can direct attention to the environment, as in the case of reformers and activists who argue for integration or segregation. Also, ego-defensive forces may create a need to blame the person or the environment. By blaming the poor, for example, one may feel personally competent or unobliged to contribute to remediation. Or, by blaming the environment one may see a way to assuage personal guilt by shifting responsibility from the self to others. Snyder (1990) has drawn attention to the need to preserve a sense of control, this being a principal motivation on the part
of both society and the individual in holding people responsible for their actions.

Additionally, the environment may be perceived as fixed, as too difficult to change. Effort may therefore be expended on changing the person. A case in point is the misperception that job tasks and the work environment are immutable. Instead of trying to modify them, the potential worker may be denied employment, directed elsewhere, or trained for a different occupation. The net effect is that the person needs to change, not the environment. The concept of "reasonable accommodations," however, shifts the focus to the environment. Increasingly, modifying the environment, physically or through rule change, is becoming evident. Examples include removing architectural barriers, establishing flex-time and parental leave, rearranging task assignments, and providing supportive employment (e.g., when a coach is at hand).

Sorely needed to resolve the problem of environmental neglect is clarification of basic conceptual and methodological issues. Without that, corrective measures will remain limited, a basic reason being that the forces toward perceiving people and their attributes are overpowering. Fortunately, the Conference on Conceptualization and Measurement of Organism-Environment Interaction (1989) holds promise. The stated goals are (a) to develop a set of conceptual guidelines that would enable us to predict which organismic and environmental factors are most likely to interact to influence development, and (b) to develop a set of methodological criteria that would maximize our chances of identifying existing interactions.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The wide array of factors discussed thus far alert us to psychological decoys that easily lead the professional astray in practice and research. Recommendations based on this understanding are offered as safeguards. First we turn to clinical settings in which to examine the impact of the issues raised, and then to the research enterprise.

**Clinical Settings**

Clinical settings are established to help solve problems—physical, mental, or emotional. And that is part of the problem. Being problem-oriented, the clinician easily concentrates on pathology, dysfunction, and troubles, to the neglect of discovering those important assets in the person and resources in the environment that must be drawn upon in the best problem-solving efforts (Wright & Fletcher, 1982).

Consider the following example. A counselor, seeking consultation concerning the rehabilitation of a delinquent youth, presented the case of 14-year-old John. The following 10 symptoms were listed: assault, temper tantrums, stealing (car theft), fire-setting, self-destructive behavior (jumped out of a moving car), threats of harm to others, insatiable demand for attention, vandalism, wide mood swings, and underachievement in school. On the basis of these symptoms, the diagnosis on Axis I of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III-R; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) was conduct disorder, undersocialized, aggressive, and with the possibility of a dysthymic disorder; on Axis II, passive aggressive personality. No physical disorders were listed on Axis III. The psychosocial stressors, rated extreme on Axis IV, noted the death of his mother when John was a baby and successive placement with various relatives and homes. On Axis V, John's highest level of adaptive functioning was rated as poor.

Following perusal of this dismal picture, I asked the counselor whether John had anything going for him. The counselor then mentioned that John kept his own room in order, took care of his personal hygiene, liked to do things for others (although on his own terms), liked school, and had an IQ of 140. Notice how quickly the impression of John changes, once positives in the situation are brought out to share the stage with the problems. Before that, the fundamental negative bias reigned supreme. Whereas the fact of John's delinquency had led to the detection of all sorts of negatives about John's conduct and situation, the positives remained unconsidered. Is this case atypical? Only in its extreme neglect of strengths, I venture to say. Even a casual review of psychological reports of cases at mental health facilities will reveal how common it is for troublesome aspects to overshadow those that hold promise.

Notice, also, that the positives in John's case had been neglected with respect to both personal characteristics and significant environments. Environmental stresses are briefly noted on Axis IV, the Axis that requires such specification. But the counselor did not indicate any environmental sup-
ports that could be provided by John’s relatives, his school, or community. Were such environmental resources nonexistent or did they remain hidden and unexplored?

There are at least two reasons that contribute to the elusiveness of environmental resources in the assessment procedures of person-centered treatment settings. Because it is the person who is to be treated, attention is focused on the person. The consequence is that assessment procedures are inclined toward the person, not the environment. Adequate attention to resources in the environment also is made more difficult by the fundamental negative bias. Just as the negative train of thought gives short shrift to assets of the person, so it also does the resources in the environment. The affective shift required makes it more “natural” to disregard positives in the environment when trying to understand problems.

Hardly anyone would argue that the environment should be ignored, and yet we know how easily the environment fades into oblivion. Some may take the position that no one profession can do the entire job of assessment, pointing out that it is the psychologist’s responsibility to examine people, whereas social workers are specifically trained to examine circumstances in the home, school, and other community settings. However, the conclusion that psychologists are therefore absolved from seriously considering environmental factors is not warranted.

The covariation principle discussed earlier provides a readily available self-monitoring check to assist in bringing environmental issues to the foreground. The general question, “Does this behavior or problem occur in all situations?” forces one to review the many types of situations in the person’s life.

To ensure that positives are not submerged by negatives, a second recommendation is offered. It is proposed that assets and deficits approximate an equal amount of space in psychological reports and equal time at case conferences. This “equal space and time” guideline serves as a concrete reminder of the importance of seriously attending to both aspects. It follows that psychologists need to work as hard at discovering positives as negatives. In support of this effort, it is essential that psychological tests are selected that are designed to uncover strengths and assets just as tests are selected that are sensitive to deficits and pathology.

The Four-Front Approach

Once the power of the fundamental negative bias and the forces that keep the environment at bay are recognized, it becomes clear that the assessment and diagnostic processes need to be engaged on four fronts. Professionals must give serious attention to (a) deficiencies and undermining characteristics of the person, (b) strengths and assets of the person, (c) lacks and destructive factors in the environment, and (d) resources and opportunities in the environment.

Highlighting positives as well as negatives in both the person and the environment serves vital purposes. It provides a framework to counteract deindividuation. It affects the significance of the negatives and enlarges remediation possibilities. It also encourages the discovery of assets and resources that can be developed in serving human potential.

A brief example of the efficacy of using assets to remediate deficits involves the case of a middle-aged man whose visual-spatial skills were impaired by a stroke (Chelune, 1983). The neuropsychologist was able to demonstrate the potential utility of using the client’s intact verbal skills as a means of compensating for the considerable difficulty he had performing such construction tasks as copying a cross. When instructed to “talk himself through” such tasks, he was able to do them without difficulty. If only the impaired side of his functioning had been attended to, remediation possibilities would have been limited.

In accord with the approach on four fronts, an attempt was made to correct common oversights that appeared in the behavior checklists on children’s intake forms at mental health centers (Fletcher, 1979). These checklists essentially pointed up child problems but rarely, if at all, included items pertaining to child assets or the environment. A checklist was therefore constructed consisting of four separate parts: (a) Child Problems (39 items; e.g., temper outbursts, mean to others); (b) Child Assets (39 items; e.g., affectionate, finishes tasks); (c) Environmental Problems (21 items; e.g., family fights, lack of recreational opportunities); (d) Environmental Resources (21 items; e.g., grandparent(s), school). Notice that the problems and assets on the child side were made equal in number, as were the problems and resources on the environmental side, but that the child items far exceeded the environmental items.
This disparity occurred in spite of a serious attempt to correct it and reflects the greater availability of person categories in our lexicon than environmental categories.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Following its third revision (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) has been widely accepted in the United States as the diagnostic tool of mental health clinicians and researchers. It also has had a major influence internationally. The last revision, DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987), describes over 200 categories of mental disorder in terms of major features, symptoms, and distinguishing criteria. Five Axes are provided for recording basic information. The first three constitute the official diagnostic assessment:

I. Clinical Syndromes
II. Developmental and Personality Disorders
III. Physical Disorders (related to understanding and management)

The last two Axes (also included in DSM-III) represent a major innovation:

IV. Severity of Psychosocial Stressors
V. Global Assessment of Functioning

An enormous amount of research and care has gone into the DSMs. Because DSM is such an important *evolving* document, it is fitting that we examine some of the ideas that have determined its current nature. The discussion and recommendations center around the problems of deindividuation, the fundamental negative bias, and neglect of environmental considerations.

Deindividuation

The evidence is clear. Affixing a label (diagnosis in the present instance) leads to a muting of differences within the labeled group. The working groups involved in DSM-III and its revision (DSM-III-R) were not naive. They remind the user that a "misconception is that all people described as having the same mental disorder are alike in all important ways. Although [they] . . . have at least the defining features of the disorder, they may well differ in other important respects that may affect clinical management and outcome" (DSM-III-R, 1987, p. xxiii).

But within-group deindividuation is so insidious that all too readily it reaches the ultimate point of dehumanization—the person is then made equivalent to the mental disorder. Once again the DSM working group, alert to this danger, cautions, "A common misconception is that a classification of mental disorders classifies people, when actually what are being classified are disorders that people have. For this reason, the text of DSM-III-R (as did the text of DSM-III) avoids the use of such expressions as 'a schizophrenic' or 'an alcoholic,' and instead used the more accurate, but admittedly more cumbersome, 'a person with Schizophrenia' or 'a person with Alcohol Dependence'" (DSM-III-R, 1987, p. xxiii). My belief, however, is that the two caveats, wise as they are, cannot stem the tide of deindividuation so long as a few diagnostic labels dominate perception. What is needed is greater individuation in terms of the four-front approach.

The Fundamental Negative Bias

It is my conviction that so long as the main diagnostic categories are disorders, relatively little effort will be expended on personal assets and environmental resources. The DSM working groups made a beginning attempt to offset this danger by including Axis V, which requires a rating of the person's current psychological, social, and occupational functioning as well as the highest functioning level achieved during the past year. The Global Assessment of Functioning Scale is provided to assist this assessment. However, a scant two pages is concerned with Axis V in contrast to the hundreds of pages devoted to diagnosing mental disorders. Small wonder that the aforementioned report of the delinquent youth was so negatively one-sided, and small wonder that attention to deficits and pathology so commonly overwhelms the reporting of strengths and assets in mental health agencies.

The rejoinder may be that it is the job of mental health agencies to diagnose and deal with problems, and that problems refer to dysfunction, not to well-functioning areas. But the rejoinder to this point of view is that inasmuch as the person functions as a whole system in which healthy and dysfunctional characteristics affect each other, both aspects must be given serious attention in diagnosis and treatment plans. Surely it makes a differ-
ence to both diagnosis and treatment if a client is aware of his or her difficulties, is willing to accept help, is responsible, is kind, and gets along with others. Systematic research can help to clarify which personal assets need to be singled out, how they cluster, and how to present them; on profiles, checklists, rating scales, for example.

Neglect of Environmental Considerations

Axis IV was devised in recognition of the fact that the environment is not inconsequential in understanding and diagnosing mental disorder. Still, Axis IV must be considered barely a first step in meeting the challenge. First to be observed is that this Axis refers to psychosocial stressors, not resources. The Axis is helpful insofar as its guidelines draw attention to the environment—problems regarding family, occupation, living circumstances, and so forth. Even so, very little space is committed to Axis IV. Only three pages are devoted to presenting the Severity of Psychosocial Stressors Scale and its instructions. The fact that attention to the environment has barely begun is also evident in the authors’ statement “that it should . . . be noted that DSM-III-R does not attempt to classify disturbed dyadic, family, or other interpersonal relationships” (1987, p. xxv).

The second point to be noted is that the rating of the severity of the stressor is based on the clinician’s judgment of the stress of an average person in similar circumstances, not on the reaction of the client, “even though . . . the client may be especially vulnerable” (1987, p. 19). It is not clear why such deindividuation should prevail, especially in light of the difference in perspectives between the insider who experiences the environment and the outsider who merely observes it.

An additional point to be noted is that there is no Axis that directs attention to environmental supports. In my view, this is a serious omission for the same reason that applies to relegating positive personal attributes to the background.

DSM-III-R states that “each of the mental disorders is conceptualized as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in a person [italics added]. . . . Whatever its original cause, it must currently be considered a manifestation of a . . . dysfunction in the person [italics added] (1987, p. xxiii). Although the intent of this conceptualization is well taken—namely, to exclude “deviant behavior” and con-

flicts that are primarily between the individual and society from being considered mental disorders—one can see how the concept of “in the person” contributes to a fine-grained picture of the person within a more or less environmental vacuum.

Future Revisions

“DSM-III is only one still frame in the ongoing process of attempting to better understand mental disorders. DSM-III-R represents still another frame” (1987, p. xxvii). So spoke the authors, a beautifully stated affirmation that reflects the integrity of both scientist and clinician in recognizing the limitations of current knowledge.

The themes of this chapter, with its focus on the problems of deindividuation, the fundamental negative bias, and neglect of environmental considerations, strongly suggest that the recommended four-front approach become the model for future DSM revisions. How else can positives as well as negatives in both the person and the environment be made sufficiently salient to allow an integrated assessment of the whole person-in-environment? Is it too impractical to envision four DSM volumes, one volume devoted to each of the fronts? Can anything short of that do justice to the goal of diagnosing and remediating problems with which a person is struggling? Does this mean that there would be separate “diagnoses” pertaining to each of the fronts? That remains for future DSM working groups to decide, but probably a clear characterization of each front would have to be indicated.

The DSM working group was encouraged by the “increased commitment . . . to reliance on data as the basis for understanding mental disorders” (DSM-III-R, 1987, p. xxvii). But the question is, “What kind of data do we need to rely on?” The authors explicitly state that “it should be understood that for most of the categories the diagnostic criteria . . . have not yet been fully validated by data about such important correlates as clinical course, outcome, family history, and treatment response. Undoubtedly, with further study, the criteria will be further refined” (p. xxiv). It is my view that further study will require collecting data on all four fronts recommended here in order for diagnoses to be validated by clinical course and treatment response.

The DSM authors recognize that “additional information about the person being evaluated be-
Beyond that required to make a DSM-III-R diagnosis will invariably be necessary” (1987, p. xxvi). What is not recognized is that the additional information must detail personal strengths and environmental difficulties and resources with the same investigatory acumen as is currently devoted to symptoms of pathology. The earlier mentioned (p. 479) Conference on Organism-Environment Interaction (1989) can be expected to contribute guidelines toward conceptual and methodological clarification to assist in gathering relevant information.

Whatever the nature of future DSMs, however, the recommendations proposed here can be instituted in clinical practice. These recommendations refer to the four-front approach, approximating equal time and space to assets as to deficits in psychological reports and at case conferences, and to uncovering the environment by covarying problematic behavior with situations in the person’s life.

The main themes argued in the present paper also raise issues bearing on the conduct and interpretation of research. A few examples are discussed below.

Comparing Conditions and Groups in Research

The difference in perspectives of the outsider and insider, and the power of the fundamental negative bias alert us to certain pitfalls that need to be avoided in interpreting research. Consider an experiment that compared reactions of able-bodied persons to confederate interviewers with and without a simulated disability. (Because there is no need to indict a particular researcher, this study is not identified here.) All things were kept equal in the two conditions except for the independent variable. Although the major finding was that the interviewer with the disability was consistently rated more favorably on a variety of personality characteristics (e.g., more likable, better attitude), the results were interpreted as supporting research indicating the operation of a sympathy effect to avoid the appearance of rejection or prejudice.

A number of points need to be emphasized. First, the investigator was seduced into attending to the disability variable as the salient factor in the experiment because “all other things were kept equal.” Second, these controls kept the investigator, as observer, from attending to the context of the interview as experienced by the research participants. The negative value attributed to the disability, therefore, stood alone in determining the negative flow of thoughts and feelings, leaving the investigator to become trapped by the fundamental negative bias, even to the extent of treating findings favoring the interviewer with the disability as if they were negative.

For the research participants, however, the situation appeared very different. They knew nothing about the behavior of the interviewer being held constant in two experimental conditions in which only the interviewer’s physical appearance varied. All they were aware of was an interviewer whose status and behavior were positive. Thus, instead of the context being obliterated, the context was decidedly positive. Under these circumstances, response intensification occurred, a response that fits with other research. The research participants may have appreciated the interviewer’s apparent success in meeting the challenges of his or her disability and therefore perceived the interviewer as having special qualities as a cause or consequence of such success. The conclusion is compelling that two vastly different situations were evaluated, one as perceived by the research participants and a very different one by the experimenter.

Researchers must become sensitized to possible differences in perspective between themselves and subjects, especially in terms of the saliency and context of variables under study. They must also become aware of the power of the fundamental negative bias to influence their own thinking when the independent variable carries a negative connotation or label (disability in the above experiment).

The preceding discussion relates to research in which research participants are assigned to different conditions, not to research in which the behavior of distinct groups of people are compared. In the latter case, special precautions need to be taken lest the label identifying the groups control the investigator’s thinking. Countless numbers of studies compare males and females, blacks and whites, people with and without disabilities, heterosexuals and homosexuals, and so forth. All too often, between-group differences are attributed solely to the group characteristic made visible by the label (e.g., gender, race). What is frequently ignored or discounted are the generally large overlap in behavior between groups, within-group differences, and differences in the groups’ life circumstances. The consequent between-group
distinctiveness, within-group deindividuation, and environmental neglect have serious societal implications that need to be thought through by researchers. At the very least, the “something else perhaps” notion, proposed by the philosopher Herbert Feigl (1953), bears reemphasizing to avoid “nothing but” interpretations based on a salient, labeled variable. Feigl also reminded us that the investigator must be pressed to discover “what’s what” by systematic research.

The Problem of Statistical Significance

The fact that the null hypothesis cannot be proven statistically (Fisher, 1955) adds to the complexity of the issues raised above. Similarities between groups, typically regarded as null findings, are therefore discounted. The consequence for understanding different groups is serious, and in the case of groups that are already disadvantaged, ignoring similarities adds to the disadvantagement.

A variety of statistical procedures to help eliminate the bias against accepting the null hypothesis (i.e., similarities between groups) have been proposed. Traditionally, researchers use the .01 or .05 alpha level of significance to refer to the small probability that the obtained difference between groups could be due to chance. One proposal is that the high end of the probability range could be used to suggest the likelihood of similarity (rather than exact equivalence) between groups (Wright, 1988, p. 16). While it is true that the null hypothesis cannot logically be proven and can “at most be confirmed or strengthened” (Fisher, 1955), it should be noted that large p values do in fact “confirm or strengthen” the hypothesis that group differences are small or nonexistent. In that case, one could conclude that the obtained difference is unreliable as a difference but reliable as a similarity. The similarity, then, would have to be judged as to whether it is of psychological importance, just as a statistically significant difference has to be so judged.

The point is that investigators, by giving weight to similarities as well as to differences between groups, achieve better understanding of the data and help to stem the automatic slide toward between-group accentuation of differences. A further fact not to be overlooked is that perceived similarities promote positive intergroup relations.

Additional arguments, evidence, and procedures to counteract prejudice against accepting the null hypothesis can be found in Greenwald (1975).

The Problem of Attitude Tests of Stereotypes

When measuring attitudes toward a particular group, the intent is to get at stereotypes, at attitudes that are tied to the label designating the group. If the label connotes something negative to the respondent, as is often the case with regard to mental disorder, disability, poverty, and homosexuality, for example, then the label is likely to give rise to a negative mindset in answering the items, especially because the label, as an abstraction, is separated from particular people and circumstances.

Contributing to this mindset is a preponderance of negatively focused items that frequently, although not always, characterize attitude tests about groups stigmatized in some way. This negative loading may be a manifestation of the fundamental negative bias inasmuch as the test constructor may be led by the group’s stigmatized status to formulate items that imply devaluation. It also may be felt to be a way to minimize the influence of “social desirability”; that is, a subject’s inclination to respond favorably to items expressing what is proper.

In any case, the negative loading can have several unacceptable consequences. First, we should be concerned lest a preponderance of negatively worded items orients thinking toward the negative side of possibilities, thereby strengthening a negative-response bias. Also, rejecting a negative statement is not the same, affectively and cognitively, as affirming a positive statement. Rejecting the idea, for example, that a particular group is often conniving or lazy does not imply the opposite belief, that the group is often honest or eager to work. Both types of statements are needed to guard against a negative bias as well as to offer respondents the opportunity to express attitudes that reflect genuinely positive, as well as negative, feelings and beliefs.

In addition, an overload of negatively worded items could provide a misleading educational experience, leading the respondent to begin to believe disparaging statements that had not been entertained before. The possibility of this happening is increased by evidence showing that people tend to give more weight to negative aspects of some-
thing than to positive aspects. To counteract the excessive weight that might be given to negative items, the most obvious suggestion is to include at least the same number, and preferably a greater number, of positively worded items.

Another concern relates to the nature of stereotyping itself. Although it is understandable that attitude tests avoid differentiations among group members captured by the label, the possible deleterious effects of an ostensible scientific instrument that homogenizes people in this way are of concern. Deindividuation flies in the face of decades of research showing that a label or diagnosis tells us very little about what a person is like inasmuch as individuals are unique in their combination of interests, values, abilities, circumstances, and so forth. Because of the nature of stereotypes, however, the tests themselves have to ignore this uniqueness. To minimize stereotyping effects of such tests, it is recommended that research participants be cautioned against this possibility during debriefing.

Another urgently needed recommendation is that researchers spend at least as much effort searching for and uncovering positive attitudes as they do negative ones. To agree with this recommendation depends on believing that positive attitudes toward disadvantaged groups not only exist, but are as important as negative attitudes. They are important for two reasons. (a) Attitudes are typically ambivalent, and when evaluated within this more complex matrix, the perception of the group is likely to change. A telling example discussed earlier is the attitude change that took place toward the delinquent youth as soon as positive traits were brought to the fore. (b) Positive attitudes are also important because it is these attitudes that have to be drawn on, built on, and spread in the effort to overcome disparaging beliefs and feelings of one group toward another.

Many issues were raised in this chapter. It is hoped that readers will be encouraged to consider the conceptual reasoning, evidence, and recommendations in both their ongoing scholarly work and clinical practice.

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