

# First Impression Formation Allows Judgements in Regard to Coping in Life Rather than Subjective Well-Being

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**Abstract:** *Background/Aims:* Persons elicit emotional reactions in their vis-à-vis within a split-second, resulting in far reaching judgements. This is called first impression formation. It has been shown that respective judgements show high reliability. Data are needed on the validity. In this study we wanted to test, if it is possible to predict by first impression formation how a person feels and whether he or she has problems in life.

*Method:* We invited a convenience sample of 102 train passengers to answer a short self-rating questionnaire on their present well-being and problems in life. Additionally, a researcher recorded her first impression of the passenger by using the MED scale. The researcher did not know the other person before.

*Results:* Judgements on the impression of participants were unrelated to their present well-being. There were relations between a kind and friendly first impression formation and work-related problems and capacity restrictions in contrast to participants with a self-assured and over-confident appearance, who reported less problems with their abilities and the workplace. A friendly first impression formation was significantly more pronounced in females.

*Conclusion:* Results suggest that first impression formation reflects not so much the present subjective inner status of the person but to some degree his or her personality and adjustment in life. This suggests that impression formation may be a factor which has a direct impact on coping with life, as persons communicate with others by their non-verbal behavior.

**Keywords:** First impression formation, Mini-ICF, Social interaction, Sympathy, Workplace.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“First impression formation” is an evolutionary mechanism which intuitively elicits impressions of attractiveness, competence and personality in general within a split second when persons meet. This impression remains stable over time even if additional and contradictory information is given [1-3]. This strongly influences the communication between persons [4-6]. As impression formation emerges even before persons have talked to each other, it must be understood as an emotional process [7].

Empirical studies have shown that first impression formation and the resulting interactional behavior can be manipulated by changing the external appearance of persons, like the use of cosmetics, color of clothes, glasses, type of hair dressing [1, 9-13]. The manner of the facial expression of a person greatly influences the perception and evaluation of their attractiveness, competence, creativity, cunning, extraversion, meanness, intelligence and credibility by an external rater [14, 15]. Even the judgment of the big five personality traits can be influenced by the facial

expression [16]. These findings show that the outer appearance has an enormous impact on how other people react to a persons [1, 17-24]. Impression formation also has a role in psychiatry and psychotherapy. Mental disorders, including personality disorders, often cause dysfunctional first impressions and by this negative reactions and stigmatization by other persons [3, 6, 25-30]. The evaluation of the initial impression is therefore an important dimension in psychiatric assessments also.

It has been shown that several observers, regardless of their age and gender, come to similar first impression judgements, so that first impression formation is an objective and interindividual process [1, 8]. An important question is to what degree impression formation, which is a judgement from the outside, corresponds to the inner feeling of a person or his capacities to cope with daily demands. We wanted to test the validity of first impression formation. For this we made judgments on the outer appearance of unknown persons and asked them for a self-appraisal of their subjective feeling and problems in life.

## 2. METHOD

Subjects were adult passengers of a train. One of the authors (L.K.), a female psychologist invited a convenience sample of unknown persons to participate

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anonymously in a survey on problems in life. A total of 102 persons agreed to participate and gave their informed consent.

The questionnaire asked for age, gender (“0=male”, “1=female”) and work status (“1=self-employed”, “2=higher employee/senior official”, “3=other employee/official”, “4=pensioner”, “5=housewife/-man”, “6=unemployed”, “7=student”). The subjective state of wellbeing and coping with life was assessed with analogue scales (rating from 1, bad, to 9, good), a method which is widely used for subjective evaluations of wellbeing, pain etc. Participants were asked for their psychological and somatic well-being, satisfaction with life in general, the family, leisure time, health, living conditions, finances, and work satisfaction.

First impression was assessed with the MED Rating Scale (Minimal Emotional Dysfunction) [31]. The instruction reads: “Please rate the characteristics of the person according to your spontaneous impressions and feelings”. The 20 items were 1. Unconventional - Conventional; 2. Encroaching - Comply with limits; 3. Humble - Intelligent; 4. Uneducated - Learned; 5. Weird - Normal; 6. Unfriendly - Friendly; 7. Unappealing - Pleasant; 8. Feminine - Masculine; 9. Withdrawn - outgoing; 10. Shy - Confident; 11. Striking - Inconspicuous; 12. Strict - Relaxed; 13. Self-neglected - Vain; 14. Grave - Cheerful; 15. Strained - Thick-skinned; 16. Not resistant - Resistant; 17. Unreliable - Reliable; 18. Defensive - Communicative; 19. Vague expression - Clear expression; 20. Hostile - Sociable.

The rating can be made in a few minutes, values range from 1 to 9 [31].

Capacities were assessed in reference to the “International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)” with the 13 item self-rating Mini-ICF-APP-S [32, 33]. It covers the capacities: ‘adherence to regulations’, ‘planning and structuring tasks’, ‘flexibility and ability to adapt to changes’, ‘competency and application of knowledge’, ‘ability to make decisions and judgments’, ‘proactivity and spontaneous activity’, ‘endurance and perseverance’, ‘assertiveness’, ‘contact with others’, ‘group integration’, ‘dyadic or close relations’, ‘self-care’, ‘mobility’. Ratings can be done on a bipolar rating scale ranging from “I am fully unfit to do this (0)”, “I regularly need help (2)”, “this sometimes causes problems (3)”, “this does not always be perfect (4)”, “this is somehow possible (5)”, “I can do this quite good (6)”, “in this regard I am better than other persons (7)”, “this is definitely a strength of mine (8)”.

**3. RESULTS**

There were 102 participants. Their age was on average 39.3 years (s.d. 15.0, range 20-80), 56.9% were female, 20.6% were self-employed, 17.6% employed with a higher professional position, 28.4% other employees, 6.9% pensioners, 2.0% homemaker, 2.9% unemployed, 20.6% students.

Psychological well-being was on average 6.84 (s.d. 1.7) on a scale from 1=bad to 9=good, somatic well-

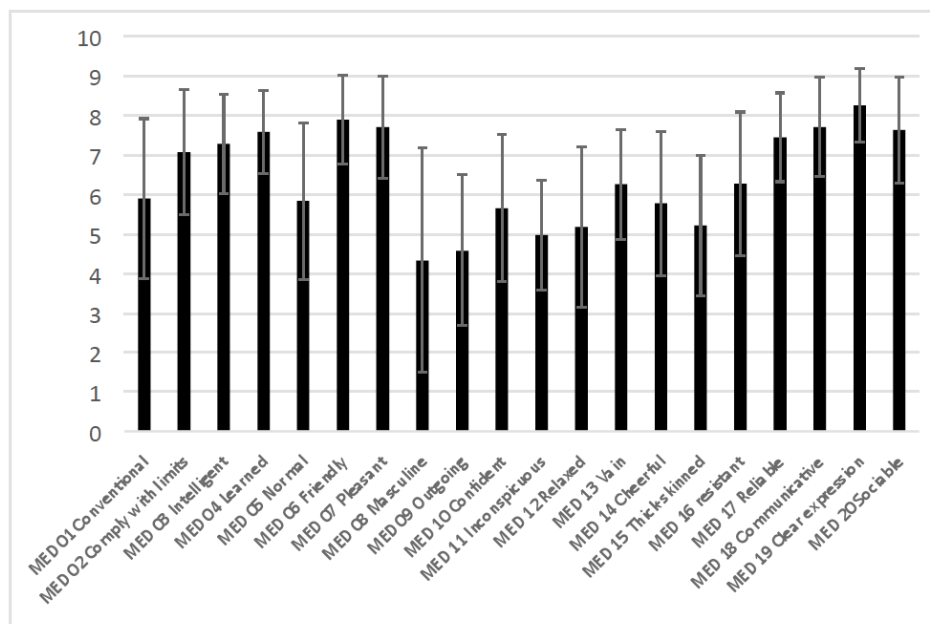


Figure 1: Mean values and standard deviations of all items of the MED scale.

being 6.74 (s.d. 1.84), life satisfaction 7.18 (s.d. 1.22), work satisfaction 3.52 (1.43). The average capacity score on the Mini-IC-APP-S was 6.39 (s.d. 0.79).

The mean values for the MED ratings are shown in Figure 1. The highest score is found for "Clear expression" (M=8.26; SD=0.93), "Friendly" (M=7.9; SD=1.12), "Pleasant" (M=7.71; SD=1.29), "Communicative" (M=7.71; SD=1.25) and "Learned" (M=7.59; SD=1.05). Lowest means had the items "Masculine" (M=4.34; SD=2.84), "Outgoing" (M=4.59; SD=1.92).

A cluster analysis was calculated for the MED ratings (Table 1), as method to order the items of the

MED scale, which then allows to speak about typologies of persons. This gives a better understanding of the results, in contrast to looking at single items or a global sum score. Persons can be best grouped by a seven cluster model. Cluster one is characterized by "inconspicuous (conventional, normal, inconspicuous)". Cluster two groups persons according to their "friendliness (Comply with limits, friendly, pleasant)". Cluster three is characterized by "self-confidence (intelligent, learned, resistant, reliable, clear expression, sociable)". Cluster four includes only be the item masculine. Cluster five can be called "robustness (outgoing, confident, thick-skinned)". Cluster six contains "easy going persons (relaxed, cheerful,

**Table 1: Pearson-Correlations Between MED Ratings and Age, Gender, well Being, Life Satisfaction, Work Satisfaction, Capacity Level (\* p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001)**

MED Items	Gender	Age	Psychol. well-being	Somatic well-being	Life satisfaction	Work satisfaction	Mini-ICF-APP-S Mean
<b>Cluster 1</b>							
Conventional	0.21*	0.05	-0.01	-0.07	-0.18	0.12	-0.03
Normal	0.10	-0.08	-0.03	-0.12	0.13	-0.18	0.04
Inconspicuous	-0.03	-0.07	-0.03	0.04	0.14	-0.17	0.14
<b>Cluster 2</b>							
Observing limits	0.20*	0.07	-0.15	-0.22*	0.01	0.41***	-0.27*
Friendly	0.30**	0.39	-0.10	0.09	0.07	0.17	-0.30**
Pleasant	0.26**	0.18	-0.15	-0.07	0.12	0.23*	-0.25**
<b>Cluster 3</b>							
Intelligent	-0.04	-0.25**	0.09	0.12	0.08	-0.13	-0.10
Learned	-0.06	-0.21*	0.12	0.22	0.13	-0.01	-0.17
Resistant	0.11	0.17	0.13	0.11	0.17	-0.08	0.10
Reliable	0.14	-0.06	0.07	0.02	0.13	-0.08	0.15
Clear expression	0.18	-0.16	0.15	0.15	-0.23*	-0.09	0.12
Sociable	0.26**	-0.07	-0.04	-0.02	0.04	0.06	-0.02
<b>Cluster 4</b>							
Masculine	-0.93**	0.08	-0.09	0.06	-0.18	0.14	-0.09
<b>Cluster 5</b>							
Outgoing	-0.16	0.12	0.44	0.08	-0.03	0.24*	-0.21*
Confident	-0.07	0.04	0.09	0.09	0.03	0.11	-0.31**
Thick-skinned	-0.02	0.07	0.12	0.14	0.03	0.20*	-0.17
<b>Cluster 6</b>							
Relaxed	-0.14	-0.01	-0.12	-0.08	-0.27**	0.20*	0.15
Cheerful	0.01	0.10	0.09	-0.01	-0.04	0.20*	0.10
Communicative	0.02	-0.18	0.07	0.01	-0.04	-0.11	-0.02
<b>Cluster 7</b>							
Vain	-0.05	0.07	0.11	0.10	0.24*	-0.10	-0.12

communicative)". Cluster seven is formed only by the item "Vanity".

Table 1 shows the correlations between the MED items (grouped according to the clusters) and well-being, life satisfaction, work satisfaction and subjective psychological capacities. There was no correlation between subjective psychological and somatic well-being on one side and any of the first impression dimensions on the other side. There were marginal correlation between life satisfaction and the impression of resistance and of clear expression.

There were significant negative correlations between work satisfaction and the cluster two (complying with limits and pleasantness), and positive correlations with the cluster five (outgoing, thick skinned) and the cluster six (relaxed, cheerful).

There were similarly significant negative correlations between the subjective appraisal of one's psychological capacities and the cluster two (complying with limits, friendliness, pleasantness) and the cluster five (outgoing, confident).

There is a correlation between gender and the impression of masculinity. Age is negatively correlated with a learned and intelligent impression.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first study, which investigates the correspondence of the outer appearance and impression formation on one hand and the self-appraisal of persons in regard to their subjective feeling and problems in life on the other hand. There are several significant and non-significant correlations, which are both of interest. Even as they are modest in size their pattern allows some interesting conclusions.

In contrast to what one might expect, there are no significant correlations with subjective psychological and somatic well-being. If a person feels happy or sad, this can be usually seen in their faces. Our data suggest that first impression formation is rather a trait or personality judgement. A person may have a sad or happy expression on one side, and independent of this, give a friendly, intelligent, or reliable impression on the other side. When a person, for example, comes to a job interview and does not get the job as nobody in the selection committee likes him because of his appearance, then this is a judgement on the personality, not the present mood state.

The notion that first impression formation reflects to some degree the personality of the person may be supported by significant correlations with work satisfaction and the subjective rating of subjective work related capacities. People, who were perceived as kind and friendly reported more problems with the workplace and work-related capacities. This suggests that people, who were perceived as self-assured and who rated themselves as more capable in respect to the workplace experience less problems in this regard than friendly persons [1, 3].

Another finding is that female participants were perceived as more friendly, pleasant and compliant with rules. It must be kept in mind, that the data collection and appraisal of first impression was done by a female interviewer, so that a gender interaction effect cannot be ruled out [34].

The negative correlation between age and the impression of intelligent may have different explanations. It could reflect the true intelligence of the interviewed persons. But, there can also be an interaction effect, or a negative ageing stereotype, as the interviewer was herself in her twenties [35].

In summary the data support the notion that first impression formation has some validity. This is even the case for a non-clinical sample, where emotional expression are less pronounced. First impression information gives some information on the personality and even adjustment in life. Therefore, it should get proper attention of psychological and clinical researchers alike.

Limitations of the study are that only one female interviewer collected data, which could have led to a one-sided evaluation of the first impression formation, and that a majority of 70.6% of the participants had a university degree. This reduces the representativity of the sample and restricts the interpretation of the results. Future studies should include various raters of both gender and focus on a more varied population.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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