

THE PERCEPTIONS OF WHITE UOFS STUDENTS WITH REGARD TO THE GENERAL BLACK POPULATION

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A central issue in intercultural interaction is the phenomenon of perception. Perception influences the understanding and interpretation of events. In order to succeed in intercultural interaction it is necessary to develop an understanding and appreciation of perceptual differences.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions that a section of white UOFS students have of the general black population.

To reach this objective, a literature study was undertaken in order to establish a clear understanding of perception and the related concepts. Such concepts included race, culture, attitude, prejudice and stereotype. The study concentrated on the interrelations between these concepts as well as on the effects of these concepts on the formation of an individual's perceptions. Through statistical analysis the following considerations were also addressed:

- Whether or not any correlations exist between the perceptions of the respondents.
- Whether male and female respondents differ with regard to their political orientations.
- Whether there are any differences and/or similarities in the perceptions of male and female respondents.
- The identification of specific factors in order to determine their contribution toward specific perceptions.



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INTRODUCTION

Prior to evaluating the perceptions of individuals it is necessary to gain an understanding of the process of perceptual formation as well as the effects of perceptions of intercultural interaction.

Regarding the process of perceptual formation, there are three phenomena which are of significance namely race, culture, and attitude.

Race

In this study the concern lay with race as a social phenomenon. Huzar (1946:12) explains that race - the visible marker with its assumed impli-

cations as to inherent differences - gets itself attached to groups that are separated or segregated or stigmatized.

Closely related to the concept of race is that of ethnicity. Feagin (1978:9) notes that ethnic groups are socially defined on the basis of cultural criteria. Thus one can define an ethnic group as a group which is socially distinguished or set apart, by others and/or by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or nationality characteristics. Yet it is important to remember that, although race and ethnicity do overlap, these are essentially two separate social entities which are independent of one another and vary with regard to their social behaviour.

Bloom (1971:30) explains that race ideologies and patterns of race relations are the result of a society's economic and social history and operate, therefore, within a given socio-economic system. Thus, in order to remedy a race relations situation it is necessary both to modify the structure of a society and its economic system and to modify its ideology or system of beliefs (Bloom, 1971:32).

Culture

Samovar, Porter & Jain (1981:24) define culture as "The deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." Culture is manifested in patterns of language and in forms of activity and behaviour that act as models for both the common adaptive acts and the styles of communication that enable us to live in a society within a given geographic environment at a given state of technical

development at a particular moment in time.

Due to differing interpretations interpersonal behaviour across cultures may result in misunderstandings. As Triandis (1976:3) explains, different cultural environments result in different norms (ideas about what is correct behaviour in a given social situation), roles (ideas about what is correct behaviour for persons holding a particular position in a social group), values (ideas about what states of the world are more desirable than others), and so on.

According to Bloom (1971:18) there is no direct connection between race and culture : "There is so much variation in government and law, social, religious and political beliefs, economic organization, art and music, language (and other elements of culture) within any race, that it is chasing a rainbow to find a specific culture for a specific race."

Attitude

The final element in the process of perceptual formation is attitude. Samovar *et al.* (1981:39) define an attitude as a learned tendency to respond in a consistent manner with respect to a given object of orientation. Attitude systems are formed by beliefs (i.e. uniquely held subjective probabilities that some object or event is related to some other object or event or to some value, concept, or attitude) and values (i.e. a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts). Attitudes are learned within a cultural context and vary from one culture to another.

Important in this study was the concept of racial attitudes. As Porter (1971:13) points out, an awareness of racial attitudes implies learning both that differences among categories exist and that people may be classified into these divisions on the basis of certain

perceptual cues. An important factor to consider is that awareness depends on the opportunity to observe racial differences through actual interracial interaction or through sources of indirect contact, like television.

Yet another concept related to attitudes is that of social attitudes, which are attitudes representing the effect produced in an individual by the social environment. These attitudes determine and direct the behaviour of the individual in ways that are socially adequate and acceptable, and also serve as modes of adjustment to a social environment (MacCrone, 1937:142).

Perceptual formation therefore occurs as our cultural and racial frames of reference determine our attitudes toward the world, which in turn determine our perceptions of the world. In other words, our attitudes serve to mould our perceptions. Attitudes can therefore be detected in order to determine perceptions.

The attitude, as a mode of adjustment to some defined and evaluated object, stands in very close relation with the overt response or behaviour which mediates between the individual and the object. The behaviour is always the realization, in some concrete, specific way, of the attitude-in-action (MacCrone, 1937:178). Any specific response depends not merely upon the attitude, but upon the attitude in relation to the particular situation. By means of language we can establish social contact with one another and so become aware of and respond to, one another's attitudes. Thus we may call an opinion a verbalized attitude. Accordingly, the existence of an attitude in an individual may be inferred from overt behaviour, or, more directly, from an appreciation of opinions (MacCrone, 1937:178).

Attitudes are psychological entities that can be detected or reflected only indirectly (Rajecki, 1982:14). Therefore the measurement of attitudes can be accomplished solely by making inferences as well as by measuring - also by making inferences - related concepts. When Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum (1957) published 'The measurement of meaning' their intent was to present a method they felt enabled researchers to quantify meaning. Their procedure resulted in bipolar scales which were factor analyzed into three major dimensions of meaning, the evaluative, potency, and activity dimensions. Of the three dimensions, the evaluative dimension was said by Osgood et al. to be appropriate as a measure of attitude (Emmert & Barker, 1989:141).

As Abrahamson (1983:322) explains, the semantic differential measures concepts on a seven-point scale that can be expanded to nine-point or eleven-point scales. This scale is bounded by bipolar adjectives on a plus and minus continuum with the central value (e.g. the number four on a seven-point scale) reflecting neutrality, or the point at which the opposite adjectives balance. Respondents are asked to place a check at the point on the continuum that best corresponds with their sentiments. The semantic differential's heavy weighing on evaluation makes the method a natural for the measurement of attitude (Bowers & Courtright, 1984:98). It is for this reason that the semantic differential was employed to measure the attitudes of the respondents in this study.

Perceptions

Samovar, et al. (1981:37) define perception as the process by which an individual selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external world. In other words, perception is an internal process whereby we convert the

physical energies of our environment into meaningful experiences. Three major socio-cultural elements have a direct and profound influence on the meanings we develop for our perceptions. These are our belief, value, attitude systems, our world view, and our social organization (Samovar *et al.*, 1981:38)

Two fundamental aspects of perception can be identified: the physical (organizing) and psychological dimensions. The physical dimension describes the acquisition of information about the outside world. The psychological dimension includes the individual make-up (personality, intelligence, emotions, beliefs, values, attitudes, etc.) which have greater impact on how we receive our environment and how we behave in regard to it. Yet we do not and cannot process all arriving message stimuli. Rather, we unconsciously select some of them to pay attention to and we ignore other stimuli. We tend to see and to report that which is most familiar, expected, and culturally related, and to ignore the other stimuli. This process is known as selective perception. Samovar *et al.* (1981:111-114) explain that there are three closely related ways in which we selectively perceive our world: selective exposure, selective attention and, lastly, selective retention.

It is clear that perception is culturally related because culture determines the manner in which we perceive our world. Therefore, in order to understand others' words and actions, we must try to understand their perceptual frames of reference. We must learn to understand how various cultures perceive the world. In the ideal intercultural encounter one would hope for many overlapping experiences and a commonality of perceptions (Samovar *et al.*, 1981:38).

Regarding the effects of perceptions on interactions, two common problems are those of prejudice and stereotype.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a term which is usually tied to negative attitudes and can be defined as an antipathy based upon faulty and inflexible generalization (Feagin, 1978:12). The particular kinds of prejudices which individuals choose are dependent of both the cultural traditions of racism in their particular society, and the particular scapegoats available as targets for aggression at any particular time (Bagley & Verma, 1979:196).

Concerning the acquisition of prejudices, Huzar (1946:3) claims that science has proved that prejudice is not an instinct and cannot be considered innate, but is acquired through formal and informal education. Racial differences themselves do not create prejudice, only what people think and feel about them creates it. Therefore our prejudices are learnt through interaction with our social environment.

Stereotype

Prejudices lead to the formation of stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as overgeneralized, oversimplified, or exaggerated beliefs associated with a category or group of people (Samovar *et al.*, 1981:18). Unlike prejudices, stereotypes may be favourable or unfavourable, and a stereotype is a belief and not an attitude. Stereotypes function to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to a specific category (Allport, 1954:191).

What is objectionable about stereotypes is their ethnocentrism and prejudice involving a negative attitude, a prejudgement, regarding other individuals in terms of their perceived group affiliation. Fundamentally, inter-group conflict stems from the identifi-

cation of individuals with groups in terms of an in-group versus an out-group distinction (Maykovich, 1972:101).

THE STATED PROBLEM

The topic chosen for this study warrants research due to the fact that the South African society consists of a multitude of different races and cultures, each with unique attitudes and perceptions. Incorrect perceptions of peoples of other races and cultures inevitably deter effective intercultural interaction and ultimately result in stereotypes of, and prejudices against, individuals of differing cultures.

With this research project, the aim is to determine the perceptions of white UOFS students in order to become aware of the attitudes and perceptions they have of the black population. It is only once we are aware of our attitudes and perceptions (and the related prejudices and stereotypes) that we can work constructively to change them.

RESEARCH GOAL

To determine the perceptions that white UOFS students have of the general black population.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling technique

A research design was used, with the respondents selected from a nonprobability sample. The particular type of nonprobability sampling technique used was that of an availability sample. The population under study was a section of white students on the campus of the UOFS.

Questionnaire

In a preliminary study bipolar scales were selected qualitatively by gathering lists of adjectives pertaining to the general black population from white UOFS students. Pearson-r correlations

were conducted in order to eliminate those scales which did not correlate positively. The questionnaire was then constructed so as to include the 27 most popular scales identified in the preliminary study.

The questionnaire consisted of a semantic differential, which is one of the most effective methods of evaluating perceptions. The semantic differential consisted of 27 evaluative scales, measured along a seven-point scale. Thus, the number 4 was considered the point of neutrality or meaninglessness, with numbers 7 and 1 being the most meaningful points along the scale. The first 27 questions of the questionnaire comprised the semantic differential, and the last four questions required the demographic data of the respondents.

Method of data collection

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed in twenty-one residences on the campus of the University of the Orange Free State. Of these twenty-one residences, eight were male residences and the remaining thirteen were female residences.

A specified number of questionnaires were given to contact persons in the selected residences. These contact persons were responsible for distributing the questionnaire in his or her residence, as well as ensuring that the questionnaires were completed accurately and thoroughly. The completion of the questionnaires was based on the premise that respondents would do so voluntarily, honestly and correctly.

Methods of data analysis

The methods employed to analyze the data were frequencies, cross tabulations, Pearson-r correlation coefficients, a main component factor analysis with an oblique rotation of the factors and t-tests.

RESULTS

Demographic data

The 288 respondents were comprised of 37,2% (N=105) males and 62,8% (N=177) females.

With regard to the political orientation of the 288 respondents, 70,1% (N=197) regard themselves as having a moderate political orientation, 16,7% (N=47) regard themselves as conservative, and 13,2% (N=37) regard themselves as liberal.

Frequency distributions of the bipolar scales

After arranging the data in a frequency distribution the general perceptions of the respondents (both the male and female respondents) could be analyzed. This was accomplished by plotting the most popular numerical choices (as determined in the frequency distribution) of the respondents with regard to each bipolar scale of the semantic differential. Thus it was possible to determine the degree to which each bipolar scale indicates a positive, neutral, or negative perception. This is clearly illustrated in figure 1.

**FIGURE 1
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF
THE BIPOLAR SCALES**

AARIABLE	7 6 5 4 3 2 1	VARIABLE
Good	Bad
Well-mannered	Unmannered
Honest	Dishonest
Interesting	Uninteresting
Sharp-witted	Shy
Brave	Cowardly
Clever	Stupid
Fair	Unfair
Friendly	Unfriendly
Peace-loving	Aggressive
Favourable	Hostile
Literate	Illiterate
Clean	Dirty
Stylish	Unstylish
Reliable	Unreliable
Capitalistic	Sociolistic
Submissive	Rebellious
Diligent	Lazy

Racist	.....	Non-racist
Patient	.....	Impatient
Responsible	.....	Irresponsible
Possessing	.....	Possessing
Initiative	.....	no initiative
Ambitious	.....	Unambitious
Captivating	.....	Repulsive
Optimistic	.....	Pessimistic
Talented	.....	Untalented
Arrogant	.....	Modest

From figure 1 the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 11 of the 27 scales display a negative perception, i.e. the number 3 on the semantic differential scale received the highest percentage of support from the respondents.
- 10 of the 27 scales display a neutral perception, i.e. the number 4 on the semantic differential scale received the second highest percentage of support from the respondents.
- The scale which received the third highest percentage of support (i.e. 4 out of 27 scales) was number 5. This indicates a more positive perception.
- 2 scales display a rather neutral perception but which suggests a positive tendency, i.e. the numbers 4 and 5 received equal percentages of support from the respondents.
- 1 scale displays a neutral perception but which suggests a negative tendency, i.e. the numbers 3 and 4 received equal percentages of support.
- 1 scale displays a definite negative perception, with the number 2 receiving the highest percentage of support.
- The remaining scale displays a definite positive perception, with the number 6 receiving the highest percentage of support from the respondents.

The final conclusion is that although there are certain extremely positive and negative perceptions, these are few in number. The tendency is toward a neu-

tral perception, but which leans slightly toward the negative.

Correlations between perceptions

In determining whether or not there are meaningful correlations between the scales (i.e. the bipolar adjectives) used to measure the perceptions of the respondents, it was found that there was a significant correlation ($p < 0,05$) between all the scales. In fact, there was a highly significant correlation ($p < 0,01$) between most of the scales.

Due to the highly significant correlation ($p < 0,01$) of the majority of the 27 scales, it can confidently be stated that change in any one variable will cause change in one or more of the other variables.

Differences and similarities in perceptions of male and female respondents

T-tests were employed to determine differences in attitudes between male and female respondents. Of the 27 scales only 3 scales displayed a significant difference ($p < 0,05$). Thus the male and female respondents differ with regard to the following three scales only: "Good versus Bad" ($t = -2,27$; d.f. = 182,08; $p = 0,024$), "Racist versus Non-racist" ($t = -2,48$; d.f. = 197,00; $p = 0,014$), and "Talented versus Untalented" ($t = -2,03$; d.f. = 198,12; $p = 0,043$). The possible reasons for the differences in perceptions could be attributed to the following:

- The "Racist versus Non-racist" scale should have read "Non-racist versus Racist," i.e. the positive scale should have preceded the negative scale. Thus the construction of the questionnaire was at fault.
- The adjectives (i.e. descriptions) "Good" and "Bad" comprising the scale "Good versus Bad" could have been too broad and therefore

could have lead to indecisiveness and uncertainty on the part of the respondents.

- The adjectives comprising the "Talented versus Untalented" scale could have been too vague or ambiguous, causing uncertainty and indecisiveness on part of the respondents.

With regard to the remaining 24 scales, the male and female respondents display similarities in attitudes.

Regarding the political orientations of the male and female respondents it was found that, for both genders, the highest percentage of support was for the moderate political orientation, the second highest for the conservative political orientation, and the lowest for the liberal political orientation. But the division of male and female respondents among these political orientations was not similar. Female support for the moderate political orientation comprised 78,5% (N=177) of the group of female respondents, whereas the percentage for male respondents was 55,8% (N=104). With regard to the conservative and liberal orientations, male support was stronger than that of females.

Upon examining tabel 1, one can clearly see that male respondents have a wider distribution with regard to political orientations. Female respondents tend toward the moderate political orientation.

**TABLE 1
POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS**

GENDER	CONSERVATIVE	MODERATE	LIBERAL
Male	23,1%	55,8%	21,1%
Female	13,0%	78,5%	8,5%

Generally, the strongest political orientation is the moderate orientation, with 70,1%. Second is the conservative orientation, with 16,7%. The weakest

political orientation is the liberal orientation, with 13,2%.

Factor analysis of the bipolar scales comprising the semantic differential

A main component factor analysis with an oblique rotation was done in order to ensure that each variable loads highly only on one factor (Hedderston, 1987:163). This rotation was chosen due to the fact that it can be accepted with a certain amount of certainty that a degree of correlation can exist between the factors. Child (1979:63) provides another argument in favour of the use of the oblique rotation: "At least we have factors which contain recognizable combinations of variables making good sense in terms of current research in this field."

The criterium for the factors which were used was that the three factors which were identified and rotated had eigenvalues greater than one. The rotated factors were individually analyzed and labelled according to the variables which loaded highly on the specific factor. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were identified and rotated. The rotated factors were individually analyzed and labelled according to the variables which loaded highly on the specific factor.

**TABLE 2
ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS
FOR VARIABLES**

VARIABLES	FAC-TOR 1	FAC-TOR 2	FAC-TOR 3
Friendly / Unfriendly	0,78		
Favourable / Unfavourable	0,74		
Peace-loving / Aggressive	0,71		
Patient / Impatient	0,70		
Arrogant / Modest	-0,69		
Reliable / Unreliable	0,68		
Fair / Unfair	0,67		

VARIABLES	FAC-TOR 1	FAC-TOR 2	FAC-TOR 3
Submissive / Rebellious	0,65		
Well-mannered / Unmannered	0,64		
Responsible / Irresponsible	0,63		
Diligent / Lazy	0,62		
Honest / Dishonest	0,61		
Captivating / Repulsive	0,60		
Good / Bad	0,60		
Optimistic / Pessimistic	0,51		
Clever / Stupid	0,43		
Ambitious / Unambitious		0,77	
Stylish / Unstylish		0,71	
Literate / Illiterate		0,64	
Capitalistic / Socialistic		0,61	
Possessing initiative /			
No initiative	0,59		
Clean / Dirty		0,50	
Sharp-witted / Shy		0,48	
Brave / Cowardly		0,42	
Racist / Non-racist			0,63
Interesting / Uninteresting			0,58
Talented / Untalented			0,47

Factor 1

This factor contains loadings which vary from extremely high (first four variables) to high. These variables constitute a list of adjectives which describe the inherent nature of an individual. Thus this factor was termed "Disposition."

Factor 2

This factor also contains loadings which vary from extremely high (first two variables) to high. As was the case with the variables comprising factor 1, these variables also describe the inherent nature of an individual but with the difference that the description is of a

more general nature. Therefore this factor was termed "Personality."

Factor 3

Although the loadings contained in this factor cannot be described as extremely high, the loadings are nevertheless high. These three variables serve to characterize an individual in a broad manner. Thus this factor was labelled "Character."

Correlations were calculated among the factors and are summarized in the following table:

**TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS AMONG FACTORS**

	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2	FACTOR 3
Factor 1 ("Disposition")	1,00	-	-
Factor 2 ("Personality")	0,45	1,00	-
Factor 3 ("Character")	0,10	0,13	1,00

It should be noted that the correlations among the factors are relatively low.

**TABLE 4
FACTOR SUMMARY**

VARIABLES	H ²	FAC-TOR	EIGEN-VALUE	VA-RIANCE (%)
Good / Bad	0,54	1	10,80	40,0
Well-mannered / Unmannered	0,60	2	1,95	7,2
Honest / Dishonest	0,54	3	1,40	5,2
Interesting / Uninteresting	0,54			
Sharp-witted / Shy	0,34			
Brave / Cowardly	0,42			
Clever / Stupid	0,58			
Fair / Unfair	0,52			
Friendly / Unfriendly	0,61			
Peace-loving / Aggressive	0,61			
Favourable / Hostile	0,67			
Literate / Illiterate	0,51			
Clean / Dirty	0,53			

VARIABLES	H ²	FAC-TOR	EIGEN-VALUE	VA-RIANCE (%)
Stylish / Unstylish	0,57			
Reliable / Unreliable	0,63			
Capitalistic / Socialistic	0,31			
Submissive / Rebellious	0,44			
Diligent / Lazy	0,58			
Racist / Nonracist	0,44			
Patient / Impatient	0,46			
Responsible / Irresponsible	0,60			
Possessing initiative / No initiative	0,53			
Ambitious / Unambitious	0,64			
Captivating / Repulsive	0,60			
Optimistic / Pessimistic	0,38			
Talented / Untalented	0,54			
Arrogant / Modest	0,45			

The following conclusions can be drawn from Table 4:

- The communality (h^2) of each variable refers to the proportion of variance of the specific variable which is clarified by all the factors. For example: $(0,54)^2 = 29,2\%$ of the variance (changability) of the variable "Honest versus Dishonest" is clarified collectively by the three identified factors.
- For factor one's eigenvalue of 10,80 in this factor analysis in which 27 scale of variables were used, the proportion of the variance which can be clarified by factor 1 is equal to 40,0%; factor 2 (7,2%) and factor 3 (5,2%). Collectively the total of all three factors is 52,4%, i.e. there is a variance of 47,6% which cannot be clarified by the three identified factors. Thus additional factors (as well as additional variables) will have to

be identified (in a follow-up study) in order to diminish this percentage.

CONCLUSION

The characteristic problem with which the research in the behavioural sciences is confronted is the fact that the variables cannot be directly observed. Thus the researcher is obliged to rely on inferences made with regard to the unobservable phenomenon under investigation. The main problem is thus centred around the question of the validity and reliability of these inferences.

In this study it was found that there is a highly significant correlation ($p < 0,01$) between the majority of the perceptions held by the respondents. Thus the implication is that one perceptual change will cause the other perceptions to undergo a similar change (whether that change be positive or negative).

Regarding the political orientations of the male and female respondents, it was found that both groups of respondents have the strongest support for the moderate political orientation, followed by the conservative orientation, and finally the liberal orientation. Despite this similarity, the female respondents tend towards the moderate political orientation while the male respondents have a wider distribution with regard to the political orientations.

This study revealed that there are no significant differences between the male and female respondents with regard to their perceptions of the black population of South Africa.

With regard to the contribution of specific factors towards specific perceptions of the respondents, it was found that the collective total of the 3 identified factors (i.e. Disposition, Personality, and Character) is 52,4%. This means that there exists a variance of 47,6% which cannot be clarified by the

three identified factors. Thus additional factors (as well as additional variables) will have to be identified in a follow-up study in order to diminish this percentage.

This research project has laid the foundation for further research regarding the perceptions of a section of young white South Africans with regard to the general black population of South Africa. Thus a follow-up study is recommended.

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