

Person Perception in Childhood and Adolescence

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Prior to the early 1970s little was known about how children viewed others. Previous research had focused on the types of thoughts children had about others, rather than how they arrived at and how to categorize these impressions. Additionally, it was assumed that understanding the development of impression formation in childhood would prove useful for understanding impression formation in adulthood.

Bromley and Livesley recruited 320 school children aging from 7 to 15 years old. They split their sample into eight age groups with forty children in each group. Each age group was subdivided by gender and by intelligence. They made several hypotheses for their experiment. First, they hypothesized that younger children would describe others based upon more superficial traits but would describe others in terms of their personality or other more central traits more often as they grew older. Second, they hypothesized that females would describe others based more on personality or psychological traits. Third, they hypothesized that children with higher IQs would use more abstract descriptors that require inferences about the person's personality. Fourth, they hypothesized that children would apply central descriptors to children before adults. Fifth, they hypothesized that children would use more descriptors and longer descriptions when describing children of the same gender. Sixth and finally, they hypothesized that children would use longer descriptions and more central descriptors of people they liked.

The children were asked to describe eight people they knew, and the researchers conducted a content analysis of the children's answers. The purpose of this content analysis was

to describe the different ways in which children perceive others as exemplified by their description of others, and to categorize these descriptions.

Their findings supported most of their six hypotheses. First, there was a significant positive correlation between age and the number and proportion of central descriptors used. Secondly, females used more central descriptors than males, but there was not an increase in the proportion of central descriptors. Third, those of higher IQ used more and a higher proportion of central descriptors. Fourth, children did apply more central descriptors to other children than to adults. However, fifth and sixth hypotheses were not supported. Fifth, they found that more central descriptors were used when describing those of the opposite gender in direct contrast to what they expected. Sixth and finally, there was no difference between the type of descriptors used and whether the subject was liked. Their data also showed that there was not a significant difference between the age groups on the proportion of central descriptors used after the age of eight

Livesley and Bromley were able to make several important conclusions from their data. They concluded that the first eight years of life are an important period of immense psychological growth and development. However, they still found a steady increase in the number of central descriptors used from the ages of 7 to 10 and from the ages of 7 to 8. Despite this, they still concluded that age had the biggest effect on both the proportion and the number of central descriptors used. Furthermore, they found that females used more central descriptors but not a higher proportion. Older subjects showed more abstract reasoning skills as evidenced by their increased usage of inference based central descriptors about personality or psychological traits. Finally, there was a decrease by age in the number of superficial and unrelated descriptors used.

This experiment is a classic in the field of psychology. A great deal of later social psychological research was based upon this experiment. Furthermore, the methodology used by Livesley and Bromley in their content analysis has been used in subsequent studies. Even the coding method and categories used to organize and describe the content in this study have proven useful to subsequent researchers. However, later research found that studies utilizing open ended descriptions (where children can describe others however they please) are misleading because they tend to find more age-related differences in person perception. This effect may perhaps be due to limited expressive abilities in younger children as opposed to a difference in how children perceive others as Livesley and Bromley suggested. Ultimately, their study has made a lasting impact both on social psychology (because of their findings), and on research designs (because of their methodology).

Further Reading

Heller, K. A., & Berndt, T. J. (1981). Developmental changes in the formation and organization of personality attributions. *Child Development*, 52, 683–691. doi:10.2307/1129190

Ladd, G. W., & Emerson, E. S. (1984). Shared knowledge in children's friendships.

Developmental Psychology, 20 (5), 932-940. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.20.5.932

Livesley, W. J., & Bromley, D. B. (1973). *Person perception in childhood and adolescence*. Oxford, England: John Wiley & Sons.