The Logic of First Impressions
Some Major Assumptions

Introduction

A woman came to Berkeley for a short stay with her friend, who was a faculty member at the University of California. The faculty member had mentioned to the visitor that the author was a friend of hers. The author's first meeting with the visitor occurred in the office of the faculty member. The woman reported being struck by how tall I was. My actual height is an unremarkable five foot eight inches, the woman's about five foot six, and the faculty member's five foot four. Further, this woman had been told nothing about my physical appearance prior to this meeting. With this in mind, what was the origin of my remarkable height? What did this woman notice about me, and why, and how did this lead her to comment on how tall I was?

Events like these are commonplace enough to be recalled by us all. New people enter our daily lives and it needs to be decided on the basis of first impressions, what to do about them or with them. It needs to be decided how to interact with them; whether to hire them, be their friend, marry them, and so on. In making such decisions, use is made of an ability to ascertain, rather quickly, 'what sort of people' these people are, an ability that operates within the constraints of time, available information, and the restricted potential for observation that these situations impose. What we can do in such situations is make spot characterisations of others. In this regard we integrate events, actions, and various other sundries into kinds of people.

Offhand, this ability sounds like some form of cognitive information processing, but it would be disastrous to conceptualise it that way. Immediate impressions of others do not merely occur; they are what Garfinkel calls accountably rational features of social structure.[1] That they happen, how they happen, why, and where they happen, are all a part of common sense knowledge. But such generic knowledge, in its turn, is used in expecting, reasoning about, seeing, manipulating, and accounting for actual concrete impressions. Because of this and because impression formation occurs in the context of very practical motives, and socially defined situations, we can expect impression formation to be a process that occurs in everyday life in a distinctive way. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what the relevant factors are which govern this process, as it occurs in natural situations. This paper will be one attempt to describe some of these factors.

Methodology

The methods used to accomplish the above goal have been summarised elsewhere by the author under the title of 'hunt and peck ethnography.' First, insofar as personal and social knowledge is used to get, give off, and talk about impressions of others, we can speak of a 'methodology' being employed to obtain this information. In this paper the concept of methodology is used as a metaphor, or set of

[1] Garfinkel has treated the problem of accountable rationality in numerous writings. Among other places see Garfinkel (1967) for a discussion of various aspects of this problem.

sensitising concepts, to uncover aspects of the process in question. Of course, there are ways in which this metaphor literally applies, and there are ways in which it is only a metaphor. Since spot characterisations of others occur fitfully, and often unexpectedly in many kinds of situations, between many kinds of people, the author wished to obtain a large amount of heterogeneous information first. This was done, if crudely, by 'hiring' various friends and acquaintances as research assistants. That is, they were informed of the author's interests, his metaphor of 'methodology,' and asked to remember and write down if possible the getting, giving off, and talking about impressions as they occurred in these people's lives. Students of several classes were asked to get certain kinds of information of this type within the space of a week or two and write up the results in detail. Certain natural 'experiments' were performed, such as a duplication of the warm-cold experiment in everyday situations. That is, a student would inform a friend that a person they were about to meet was smart, shy, etc. Following the meeting, the actual impressions obtained were compared to what the person had been told to expect. Needless to say, the author, himself, was constantly on the lookout for the process, when and insofar as it occurred within his own ordinary life. As a result, a great deal of rich, if crude, information was obtained concerning the different and similar aspects of this process, as it occurs in a variety of situations.

Through the above procedures, systematic and comparable data were obtained on some aspects of impression formation. This paper presents an analytic framework that attempts to summarise some of the social structure of impression formation. Although the text could have been peppered with examples, this was not done, since the aim was not to verify hypotheses but to discover relevant parameters.

A second stage in studying this topic would be to attempt a full-fledged analysis of impression formation, as it occurs in some particular social situations (such as job interviews or parties), which incorporated many of the parameters of this paper as possible 'independent' or 'dependent' variables.

Some Features of Impression Formation

People as Social Objects

Perhaps the most obvious thing common sense tells us about the traits of others would be called a comprehension axiom in logic: kinds of people exist. That is, such things as 'kinds of people' are in the world and make conceptual sense. What is meant by 'people' in 'kinds of people?' In impression formation, trans-situational properties are assigned to single persons, as personal properties. This involves a very specialised and very unsociological thought construct—the personal being or 'individual.' There are many alternate ways to attend to someone, both within and between societies. Probably most people that come within our social vicinity as we enter and leave various urban environments are orientated to, remembered and described, not as individuals but as events and personal circumstances. My height, if encountered by this woman when she sat behind me in a movie, might have evoked 'I can't see'—a circumstance of hers rather than a property of mine.

As a person, I would not be there for her.

There is another important way others can be 'there' for us as social objects. They can be representatives of social categories. One gets visited by 'a salesman,' sees a 'feminist' on television, attends a lecture by an 'ethnomethodologist,' and so on. In situations where this is one's total status, this is completely what one 'is' for another, one's actions and characteristics are assigned to the group. As an individual you are not stuck with such characteristics, for they may be remembered and described as the way 'they' talk, or the attitudes of that 'woman.' You, as such, might not even be remembered, and might later be assigned contrasting characteristics when treated as 'him' or 'her.' Having the status of an individual, or of a representative of a social category, are not mutually exclusive, although each can occur separate from the other. Their actual or potential co-occurrence constitutes a typical problem for managing first impressions.

One such problem comes about when a person can anticipate that he will become a personified social category for others, if that category comes out too early in their first contact. He can anticipate that common knowledge about the category will dramatically affect the kind of person others will take him to be. It will affect what they will ask of him, what will concern and interest them about him, and so forth. In such cases, a simple and elegant strategy is to delay the introduction of the information that pairs him to the social category. This effects a subtle phenomenological shift. If one hedges on, 'What do you do for a living?' with something like 'I teach school,' and the evasion works, then 'Harvard Professor,' when it eventually gets announced can be interpreted by others as merely one of your characteristics. However if this status is revealed too early, such as before the interaction even begins, then 'Harvard Professor' can become who you *are* (from the point of view of others). The author has employed such devices as this, himself. They often produce lovely sequences of strategic interaction.[2] For one can decide what to tell others about one's job now, by assuming you will be telling others the whole story later. It can be seen whether, and at what points, what you are currently saying will sound like evasion, lies or deception, given what the others will find out later. In turn, this information about potential meanings can be used to decide what to say now, as well as when and how to divulge withheld information. On the other hand, there are often reasons to create the impression that you are not trying to impress someone. One way to do this is to arrange for others to see that you had been trying to avoid telling them you were a Harvard Professor. Or again, knowing that 'Harvard Professor' will be coming up as something others will be learning about you, you can use this information to populate the first n – 1 items with things about you that are incompatible with the category. Variations on this situation can be left to the reader's ingenuity.

Tracking Individuals

Having mentioned the problem of recognising someone as an individual, the next issue would be how are individuals tracked? There is a whole social apparatus to do this. Getting and giving impressions buys into this

[2] See Goffman (1970).

apparatus. We will just mention one assumption connected with it. As logical objects 'individuals' are identified (under equivalence) with the formula 'same body same individual.' Again, this is no trivial maxim. Innumerable social conventions follow from it. Treating split personality complexes as 'roles,' qualitatively opposite behaviour patterns over time as one person who 'changes,' can all be thought of as accounting practices that preserve the equivalence of tracking a person and tracking a body. More to our point, in face-to-face interaction this makes for a saliency of sight. Part of the work involved in getting another to do something called 'noticing a persons' is getting them to look at his body. Listening to his voice alone will not do, since it will not permit re-recognition. In later face-to-face situations it will be those who look like him who might be, or are, the 'same person,' not those who sound like him. In fact, in terms of re-recognition, we could derive the principles that, if you sound like you but look like someone else, you are someone else who sounds like you, while if you look like you and sound like someone else, you are you, sounding like someone else. It's an important feature of recognition by looking (compared to voice recognition) that it can be done before an interaction starts. This fact makes for interesting differences in the initial sequencing and meaning structures of face-to-face talking, compared to phone calls and similar non-verbal situations.[3] The saliency of sight may also be responsible for the peculiar fact that, from the member's point of view, it seems impossible to meet someone by phone or mail. It takes a face-to-face encounter.

[3] See Schegloff (1971) for a discussion of identifications in the initial sequences of phone conversations.

The Logic of Personal Traits

Hopefully, the above has suggested some of the conceptual and cognitive problems involved in seeing and re-recognising someone as an 'individual.' Now for the 'kinds,' in 'kinds of people.' What sorts of properties make sense to us as belonging to people? Again, a whole cultural logic seems to be involved. For example, age and place, in addition to being situations of people, can actually be thought of as kinds of people, for example teenagers or New Yorkers. Since such categories make conceptual sense, knowledge and inferences can be organised around them. Such knowledge not only includes cultural stereotypes, but personal stocks of knowledge built up as one encounters different kinds of people over the course of one's life. A case in point is a transcript analysed by a colleague and myself, where a blind lady constructs an argument about the inconsiderate behaviour of 'New Yorkers' from incidents that happened to her on New York subways. Here we see an inference pattern that translates *where* one encounters others, into *who* the others are. Further, we are not only talking about some fixed collection of cultural categories but, at the very least, of a syntax that can build new categories of this kind. Clearly, since place translates into kinds of people for us, different ontological categories of people can be built from the varieties of ways to describe places. Thus the existence of 'city people,' 'street people,' 'bar people,' and so on. We already saw how the knowledge built around such categories can both affect and constitute impression formation. By way of cultural contrast, demographers frequently encounter societies where people do not have

ages—an old man is simply a young man later. Taylor gives the interesting example of cultures where decision making does not use the distinction between individual and collective opinion.[4] In such places conservatives or socialists cannot exist on logical grounds, since beliefs or attitudes, as properties of single persons, do not make any kind of conceptual sense. Conversely, we probably would not know a sorcerer if we tripped over one.

There is some truth to a normative association between sets of parameters used to recognise and describe others, and social variables such as subculture, ethnicity, and social situation. But impression formation does not seem to be a process of fitting concrete observations, to some fixed collection of socially given parameters internalised in the individual. We do not seem to be constrained in that way.[5] The main significance of common sense reasoning about properties of people lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that the activity of forming impressions has hermeneutic properties: there are lots of things about others that are noticeable, that cannot, or will not, be noticed unless a person already knows they are there or is already prepared to notice them. This is because the cognitive work one does when noticing something about another is often too demanding to occur by accident, that is the use of memory, the eye and ear work, the putting things together in a particular way, the acute timing, etc. In addition, noticing traits of others is often done in one's spare time, that is one need not notice them in order to act appropriately.

Given considerations like these, impression formation does not, in general, consist in noticing social facts, *i.e.*, things that are there for anyone to see. That this is so is itself part of common sense. Thus multiple observers of the same person often compare notes later to find out what each made of that person. Indeed, the way I learned of my remarkable height was by later talking about my interest in first impressions and asking the lady about her impressions of me when we met. At the meeting itself my height was simply not there for myself and the faculty member. It is thus of paramount importance to explore the ways in which persons enter entire situations prepared to make certain observations, in the various senses of the word 'prepared.' An analysis of first impressions would have to deal with these senses of prepared, e.g., the characteristics of others that make conceptual sense, that are expected, that one has already been told about, that one is interested in, that are typical, etc.

First Impression: Sampling Procedures

The structure of direct observations is governed by a second sweeping assumption: members[6] take it that they can find out about another person's characteristics on single *occasions*. One could imagine a methodology that

[4] This example was given in an informal seminar in Berkeley, California (1974) by Charles Taylor, then a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. The examples themselves are used here for illustrative contrasts. Their detailed empirical accuracy, or even meaning, is unknown to the author.

[5] Experiments in person perception have shown a remarkable diversity and creativity in members' descriptions of others, as well as an ability to use all amounts and varieties of data to obtain impressions.

[6] For the purposes of this paper the term 'member' can be read as indicating a socialised adult of our society.

consisted of inferences that were made from multiple observations on multiple occasions; that rival hypotheses which explain a single observation were considered and weeded out on the basis of recent observations; or that specific information was required, from the member's point of view, to discover specific characteristics. In contrast, members find the data present in single occasions of whatever sort, and in whatever amounts, quite adequate for making immediate and often elaborate inferences about the sort of person another is. In addition these inferences are non-tentative. It is not merely that the traits assigned to people are trans-situational, they stand until contradicted. There is no non-trivial sense in which we are describing assumptions of common sense theory, but we will get to that in a moment. For the present, it is hopefully clear that we are at least discussing abilities, *i.e.*, things that actually happen. On flurry of continuous talk, during one interaction, can make a person loquacious for another.[7] Having become 'a blabbermouth,' he remains so until shown otherwise. We can think like this, and often do.

If impressions can come from single occasions, the next question becomes which occasions? Clearly certain social situations are virtually pregnant with the potential for producing impressions in ways that others are not. In such situations one gets impressions like he gets the flu. At various points 'he's like this' or 'she's like that' just come to you. In other people one interacts with frequently, do not evoke this kind of noticing, and this kind of thinking. This is not merely because one 'knows' them, or because there is nothing new to notice. Something gets turned off; one way of making sense of what is going on is replaced by others.

We could speak of a methodology for getting impressions, a methodology that employs a single sample procedure, with the sampling units being social situations. We could then ask how these situations are selected. But does it make sense to talk about the selection of situations? In fact, why not say members take it they can find out about others during a single day or within a single building, and then ask which days or what buildings? In other words, is there any literal sense in which members have a 'methodology' for finding out about the personal traits of others? There are good reasons to say yes. Part of that methodology involves a literal sense in which, what *members take to be* social situations are treated as sampling units in common sense reasoning about impressions. People literally come to entire situations prepared to make certain observations about others. This happens in part because, when one person tells a friend that a situation is forthcoming in which first impressions of another person are sure to occur, this often elicits from the friend prior information about this other person. Which situations are impression producing ones is part of common knowledge. After being in them, such questions as 'What did you think of him?' are asked. Such knowledge tells a person when to be phoney, *i.e.*, present a favourable presentation of self. For it indicates when his actions and remarks will be interpreted by others as examples of his general abilities and attitudes.

When one wants to assure that he will immediately come to some conclusions about another's personality, one way this is deliberately done is to set up a

[7] This is not a made up example but a case for which there is considerable data.

situation known to evoke these conclusions such as a 'meeting.'

Meetings: Some Formal Features

To see how all this operates in some detail, we will examine one class of social situations, namely meetings. Clearly, 'meetings' constitute a unit of lay social theorising. As an activity, it is something that is, and can be done in, a single interaction, instead of taking a series of them. There is even a tricky way in which one can engage in a meeting ritual with another person only once, in a normative sense. Thus, persons can arrange for a meeting, only to find that when they get together, 'they had already met.' Meetings do not seem to be some kind or part of an interaction, in some objective sense. Here we speak of the sorts of things members treat as meetings. An interaction understood by its participants as a meeting, prior to its beginning, can apparently remain so understood, somewhat independently of the actual things that eventually get said. For instance, it might be thought that exchanges of greetings and identifications are definitive parts of meetings. However, people have phone conversations whose purpose is to arrange a meeting. During such phone conversations exchanges of greetings and identifications take place. However, the phone conversation itself does not constitute the meeting, from the point of view of the callers. As already mentioned, from a member's point of view, it does not seem possible to meet someone by phone or mail. The interaction that constitutes a meeting between two persons need not be their first interaction. The phone call example illustrated that. Additionally, these people could have talked numerous times before in the public sector, before meeting. One could have been in the other's class, one might have purchased goods from the other, etc. To make matters worse, an interaction can apparently be understood as *not* a meeting during its course, only to *later* become redefined as having been one. We have data where two people interacted at a seminar on phenomenology, the interaction between them being about topics in phenomenology during a multiparty discussion. Later, when one was asked if he knew the other by a mutual friend, he described this interaction as an occasion where he 'met' the other.

As we can see, if 'meetings' are sampling units in lay theorising, they are not very objectively defined. The concept is applied to different kinds of interactions on different occasions, and whether some interaction is counted as a meeting or not seems to be subject to change over time. It can be a meeting before it occurs and become something else when it occurs, or it cannot be a meeting when it occurs and become one later, and so on. However, members understand meetings as real things in their social world with objective properties. But the objective properties of meetings (the sense that what is being talked about is some real thing that really is, will, or has happened; the sense that we can talk about what happens when people meet, as if this were some fixed class of events with definable similarities) is all a social accomplishment. The issue of accomplished objectivity is a complex one, and is extensively treated by Garfinkel in numerous works.[8]

[8] The question of how members together accomplish a sense of objectivity for some phenomenon—how they give each other the sense that something is real—has been a central concern of Garfinkel's for many years. Again see Garfinkel (1967) for a discussion(s) of this question.

We will wave our hand at the issues and just think of meetings as some kind of social definition of a situation. As such, anticipated meetings provide a way of assessing present and potential relationships between those about to meet, actual meetings provide structured ways to listen and watch during an interaction, and completed meetings are a way to talk to others about a past event and a person who figured in that event. Given all this, there are fairly easy ways to catalogue sociological reasons that meetings would lead to impression formation.

Memory and Attention in Meetings

The problems of noticing and being noticed have been mentioned. A two-person meeting is a face-to-face interaction.[9] Simply in the roles of co-conversationalists, persons would be required to notice each other because of the structure of conversation.[10] Conversationalists need to visually locate and track other conversationalists, to 'look' at them as a form of interaction, physically react to them (such as smiling at jokes), and listen to and watch them in detailed ways in order to hold up their responsibility to talk at the right times, and say the right things. Here 'noticing' is a gloss for the varieties of 'watching,' 'listening,' 'remembering,' and so on, all of which might not occur on a bus or in an elevator, nor in other environments where two people are co-present.

But there are stronger reasons to notice someone when you meet them than the fact that you are conversing with them. If you do not identify and remember their body, their name and/or the existence of the single interaction within which you met them, if you do not notice them in at least this way, future embarrassments are made possible. We have all been in those situations where another exhibits the fact that they remember you, but you cannot remember them. Such displays can be accomplished with the aid of your name, the recognition of your body, and the use of information they obtained about you within the interaction that you do not remember. Persons even give others recognition tests in the form of challenges like 'Do you remember who I am?' In not remembering them in these ways you can insult them, by displaying that they were not worth remembering, or that they didn't make an impression on you. For some people, the failure of these recognition tests is the way they come to realise that they have a specific problem with this, a problem spoken of as not being able to remember names and/or faces. Another painfully familiar takeoff to this problem of re-recognition is trying to fake it, *i.e.*, to talk with another who is familiar with you, as if you were familiar with them, all the time hoping that the information you need to keep this up will come to you, during the course of the interaction.

Our main point, obviously, would be that it was not my scientific discovery that people receive impressions of each other when they meet. Common sense

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[9] For the study of impression formation, meetings should be subdivided into categories such as two-person interactions which are arranged by the persons themselves, three person interactions where two people meet and the third is a mutual friend of both, and so on. In this short paper these distinctions are not made.

[10] The senses in which specific types of listening and watching are built into the structure of conversation, as an activity, have been treated by Sacks and Schegloff in several writings. For instance, see Sacks *et al* (1974).

associates meetings with impressions. What this does to the actual interactions in which meeting is done is a phenomenologist's delight. It is known that people come to meetings prepared to receive impressions, that is to see attitudes, abilities and so forth, in and through behaviour. It is also known that people present themselves, in Goffman's sense, at meetings. But, that both of these things are known, is itself known. This makes meetings impossibly self-conscious for many. While not trying to impress someone, you are nevertheless aware when you do something that another might take as evidence of intelligence, rudeness or whatever. The very awareness of a behaviour's potential for impressing another can seem to be a way in which one is orientating toward impression management. The recognitions, in turn, can produce behaviour that attempts to manage impressions anyway. For example, given what you know, there may be no escape from noticing that a remark of yours can be interpreted as a case of some general attitude. In such cases it is common for that remark to be followed by a spontaneous and unsolicited disclaimer, that you do not hold the attitude compatible with the remark. In fact, many meetings are virtually riddled with instructions people give each other about the proper interpretations of their behaviour, so as to infer the correct (or wanted) traits from them. Additionally the other knows you may be presenting yourself. But, that he knows that, is one of the things you know. So, one of the impressions you may attempt to give another is that you are not trying to impress him. As we saw, there are specific ways to do this. Indeed it is possible to see that, because of some behaviour on your part, whether you did it purposely or not, another will get the impression that you are trying to impress him.

Another consequence of this folk knowledge (pairing meetings with impressions) is that people are asked for their impressions of another when it becomes known that they just met the other. This is reasonable. Sometimes one can know in advance that he will be asked about his impressions of another whom he is about to meet; who will ask him, and what he will be asked. All this information can be available before the meeting takes place. This was precisely the situation for myself, the woman visitor, and faculty member. This visitor anticipated being asked about her impressions of me by the faculty member after our meeting, and had some ideas about what she would be asked about.

Additionally, announcing that you will be meeting another, to a third party, again and again has been found to evoke from that third party what he or she knows about the person about to be met. In complicated ways this gives you observations that you come to the meeting 'prepared' to make. The complexities involved can be illustrated by the protocol involving my height. It was known the woman would be meeting me. This did indeed result in the faculty member telling the woman about me. What she told the woman was about my personality. My personality sounded similar to a person she knew named Bill. Now Bill does not like her, and she does not like Bill, and Bill is short! Thus I came to be seen as unexpectedly tall.

Perhaps as a result of all this self-conscious attention, meetings have a capacity for being retained in memory in unusual detail. One form of reminiscence consists of recalling the impressions one obtains about another when they first met. In such a context,

a perhaps long past event is recalled and located in a series of subsequent events, wherein it becomes possible to describe in detail—specific glances, remarks, behaviour or circumstances that led to specific inferences about another person. It is seldom that the origins of one's opinions about another can be traced so explicitly.

I do not wish to belabour the importance of meetings. But they do illustrate one explanation for the almost automatic occurrence of impression formation in certain social situations. Members know, and use, theories of social structure, which contain their own definitions of what constitutes a social situation. These theories also associate certain of these social situations with impression formation. By examining the consequences of this fact, in particular by analysing the practical reasoning that is characteristic of environments which members treat as social situations and as places where impressions of others are formed, it is possible to understand in a sociological way, why concrete impressions are given off and received. Additionally it is possible to explore the process in some interactional detail. This paper has not engaged in such an analysis but has presented some considerations which would warrant its use.

Summary

I can summarise the perspective employed in this paper thus: instead of asking why people come to spot conclusions about other people, we asked why impression formation occurs in certain social occasions as an event. Thus the situation, not the person, is *our* sampling unit. In doing this it is necessary to describe the event (impression formation) and its structure as it occurs in everyday life. Then the causes and consequences of the occurrence of the event in specific situations can be explored. We argued that an analysis that accomplished this would have to take (at the very least) the following factors into account:

1. The cultural logic that makes the occurrence of first impressions possible in society, as an event that is recognisable to society's members.
   a) Our concept of the 'individual' as a social construction.
   b) The assumption that 'individuals' are objects that have certain trans-situational traits (similar to the assumption that witches exist and have certain properties).
   c) The logic of traits which indicate which kinds of traits are associated with which kinds of people.

2. General social knowledge about situations and people.
   a) How this affects and is affected by concrete impression formation.

3. Personal knowledge 'at hand.'
   a) How the biographical information and personal purposes with which a person comes to a situation affects what he sees in others, and what he tries to have them see in him.

4. The methodology of trait analysis.
   a) The structure of reasoning, inference and sampling used in consciously determining the traits of others.

5. The structure of interactions.
   a) How the organisation of 'main engagements,' such as conversations, games or classes

acts as a vehicle for impression formation and/or sets its limits.

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