

# Psych Labs: Background Information for Impression Formation Experiment

What are the cognitive roots of prejudice? This Psych Labs Experiment investigates whether some negative stereotypes are produced by exposure to unbalanced information about a particular minority group.

Before you begin working on your Lab Report, please read this background document, and then read the following material to strengthen your understanding about prejudice and the role of illusory correlation in forming stereotypes:

- The sections in your textbook on attribution and prejudice (including stereotyping)
- Wikipedia's "Illusory Correlation" article, containing background on the perception of false relationships based on inadequate data

You may also wish to read the first six pages (Introduction and Experiment 1) from:

- McConnell, Sherman, and Hamilton (1994) about the "distinctiveness-based explanation" for biased judgments about minority groups

One goal of this experiment project is to help you understand how outside information (including stories in the media) can influence your attitudes. A second goal is to help you understand how psychologists test hypotheses about the impact of one variable (the *independent variable*) on another variable (the *dependent variable*).

## ***Unusual Events Are More Memorable***

This impression formation experiment was based on a study conducted by David Hamilton and Robert Gifford (1976). In their experiment and in our experiment, Group A had twice as many members as Group B, but *the ratio of desirable behaviors to undesirable behaviors was exactly the same in both groups* — twice as many desirable behaviors as undesirable behaviors. Despite the fact that Group A members performed undesirable behaviors in exactly the same proportion as Group B members, the students in the Hamilton & Gifford study *overestimated the number of undesirable behaviors exhibited by Group B members*. Did your results show the same pattern?

Hamilton and Gifford called this pattern an *illusory correlation*, because the impression students formed of Group B members was associated with more undesirable behaviors. What could be responsible for this illusory correlation? It seems to be related to the fact that fewer undesirable behaviors were exhibited overall (so undesirable behaviors were unusual) and that Group B had fewer members than Group A (so Group B was a "minority group"). *"Group B" and "undesirable behaviors" were both less frequent than the alternatives, so their rare occurrence together caught people's attention, leading them to later overestimate the frequency of their joint occurrence.*

	Desirable Behaviors	Undesirable Behaviors
Group A	12	6
Group B	6	<b>3</b>

### ***Why Is This Important?***

The experiment by Hamilton and Gifford is helpful for showing us how racial and ethnic stereotypes may be formed and perpetuated. The experiment demonstrated that relatively rare events catch people's attention, and thus are more memorable. *Because members of minority groups are, by definition, less numerous than the majority group, and because criminal behaviors are less common than lawful behaviors, when a minority member commits a crime, it is a sufficiently rare event that it gets noticed and remembered.* As members of the majority group are forming impressions of the minority group, these memorable incidents lead to illusory correlations between minority status and criminal tendencies, and thus influence the formation of negative stereotypes.

The mass media are partly responsible for reinforcing these illusory correlations. A person's racial or ethnic status is not deemed newsworthy if the person is from the majority group, but racial or ethnic status frequently is reported when the criminal is from a minority group. A later experiment (Hamilton & Rose, 1980) demonstrated that, *once we have formed stereotypes, we are more likely to remember new information that fits those stereotypes than information that contradicts them.* Thus, new experiences, filtered through our stereotypes, provide additional support to perpetuate our stereotypes.

Of course, not all stereotypes are negative, and not all are unfair overgeneralizations. Some stereotypes are simply accurate beliefs about groups of people (such as “Males are generally taller than females”) or overly favorable beliefs (such as “Women are generally nicer than men”). If stereotypes merely made us all feel good about each other, social psychologists would not be so concerned. Unfortunately, many stereotypes are negative and do produce negative outcomes. Negative stereotypes can lead to *prejudice* (unjustified, usually negative attitudes toward a group), which can lead to *discrimination* (unjustified negative behaviors toward a group or its members).

### **References**

- Hamilton, D. L., & Gifford, R. K. (1976). Illusory correlation in interpersonal perception: A cognitive basis of stereotypic judgments. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 12*, 392-407.
- Hamilton, D. L., & Rose, T. L. (1980). Illusory correlation and the maintenance of stereotypic beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39*, 832-845.
- Illusory Correlation. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory\\_correlation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_correlation)
- McConnell, A. R., Sherman, S. J., & Hamilton, D. L. (1994). Illusory correlation in the perception of groups: An extension of the distinctiveness-based account. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 414-429.