

# DIFFERENCES IN PERSON PERCEPTION

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
DEDICATION.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	3
SECTION	
I    INTRODUCTION.....	4
II   METHODS.....	6
III  RESULTS.....	8
IV  CONCLUSION.....	10
REFERENCES.....	12
APPENDIX.....	13

## **ABSTRACT**

### Differences in Person Perception

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The purpose of this study was to investigate trait characteristics that influence a person's perspective towards the prisoner population. Participants completed a perception exercise where they scored prisoners with and without special circumstances (defined in this research as mental illness symptoms). Results demonstrated that the judgement of prisoners was dependent upon the order in which the material was presented as well as the characteristics in question. The findings provide further insight into societal norms of mental illness stigma and their influence on perception of the people involved with the criminal justice system.

## **DEDICATION**

For my closest of family members: my mom, grandpa, and grandma.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to express gratitude to Dr. Darrell Worthy, Miss Kaileigh Byrne, and the Undergraduate Research Scholars program staff.

# SECTION I

## INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to investigate which factors influence a person's perspective when considering prisoners with and without mental illness. Previous studies have shown a need for understanding challenges faced by persons involved in the prison system. One representative study found that mental illnesses are pervasive in the prison system (Birmingham, 1996). Moreover, the NCJRS (National Criminal Justice Reference Service) that compares the characteristics of offenders with and without mental illnesses found that "current offense, criminal record, sentence length, time expected to be served, co-occurring substance dependence or abuse, family background, and facility conduct since current admission" influence how the public places judgement on offenders (James, 2006). These characteristics are presented based on sex, race, ethnicity, and age. Furthermore, another study found that mentioning, "a youth offender, regardless of the qualitative details... resulted in more favorable ratings by the public" (Varma, 2007). Other research shows that these characteristics (therefore individuals) may be perceived more harshly due to the over exaggeration of crime caused by the media (Pfeiffer, 2005).

Other work "examines public knowledge and public attitudes toward crime and criminal justice, with [an] emphasis [on] the mismatch between the public perception of crime and the reality of crime statistics". The key finding emphasizes "public perceptions of the seriousness of crime as a social problem... [and the] perception of offenders" (Roberts, 1997). With these negatively preconceived notions, it often proves difficult to adjust to life and succeed post-release.

To investigate the hardships of prisoners after parole, one study looked specifically at the month immediately following release (Visser, 2010). This first month is the most crucial in preventing recidivism when looking at “employment, abstinence from drugs, good family relations, and crime-free living” (Nelson, 2011). To support these findings, an additional study reporting on the employability of former offenders found that the type of offense committed altered the prisoner’s perceived employability (Cerda, 2014).

Based on this previous research, the goal of this study is to identify other factors that may also result in favorable ratings by the public. I hypothesized that participants would score prisoners with mental illness symptoms higher (more favorably). This would mean that when comparing a participant’s score that only saw a photograph with a participant’s score that saw both a photograph and a psychological evaluation (either together or after) the participant that viewed both would perceive the prisoner in a more positive way.

## SECTION II

### METHODS

Subjects signed up for this study using the SONA system. They arrived at the lab for their appointment and were given a consent form containing the pertinent information needed to participate in the study. They completed a perception survey where they were asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 5) booking photographs (from a face database which can be found at <http://agingmind.utdallas.edu/facedb>) and psychological evaluations (both viewed together and individually), followed by a few questions regarding their decision making process, and a demographics questionnaire. At the end of the study they were debriefed. Altogether, the experiment took approximately 30 minutes.

There were two conditions of the perception questionnaire, and all participants completed both parts in a counterbalanced order. In one condition of the perception questionnaire, participants scored ten mug shots based solely on a full face photograph. In the analysis this condition will be called photograph only. They then received a short biography (aside the same picture) that includes psychopathology symptoms and were asked to score the same mug shots again. In the analysis this condition will be called evaluation after. The purpose of this condition is to determine if their participants' perception changes after learning that the individual in the mug shot suffers from psychopathological distress and if so, which factor(s) caused it.



In the second condition, participants were given ten pictures and short psychological evaluations side by side and asked to score the person in the mug shot considering both his or her picture and psychological evaluation. This condition will be called the simultaneous rating in the analysis.

For all ratings, the scale used was a 1 (extremely negative perception) to 5 (extremely positive perception) Likert scale. Pictures in both conditions included five males and five females of varying ages and ethnicities. Psychological evaluations included symptoms of depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, trauma, and bipolar, among others. They were then asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and a few self-reporting questions on their perceptual changes (if they were present and noticed).

## SECTION III

### RESULTS

Paired samples t-tests comparing characteristic ratings revealed several significant effects when comparing ratings for the photograph only condition versus ratings for the evaluation after condition. This effect was observed for intelligence  $t(49)=5.10, p<.05$ , kindness  $t(48)=3.35, p<.05$ , honorableness  $t(49)=4.12, p<.05$ , respectfulness  $t(49)=4.00, p<.05$ , trustworthiness  $t(49)=5.30, p<.05$ , morality  $t(49)=4.63, p<.05$ , happiness  $t(49)=7.90, p<.05$ , and calmness  $t(49)=8.87, p<.05$ . There was not a significant effect for these comparisons for attractiveness  $t(49)=1.13, p>.05$  or innocence  $t(49)=.16, p>.05$ . Therefore, participants who saw and rated the photograph prior to receiving the psychological evaluation scored individuals as significantly less intelligent, kind, honorable, respectful, trustworthy, moral, happy, and calm.

Paired samples t-tests comparing characteristics revealed several significant effects when comparing ratings for the simultaneous condition versus ratings for the photograph only condition. This effect was observed for trustworthiness  $t(49)=-2.78, p<.05$ , innocence  $t(49)=2.54, p<.05$ , happiness  $t(49)=-7.95, p<.05$ , and calmness  $t(49)=-7.54, p<.05$ . There was not a significant effect in the same instance for intelligence  $t(49)=-1.35, p>.05$ , kindness  $t(48)=-.29, p>.05$ , honorableness  $t(49)=-1.53, p>.05$ , respectfulness  $t(49)=-.41, p>.05$ , morality  $t(49)=-.96, p>.05$ , or attractiveness  $t(49)=-.87, p>.05$ . Therefore, participants who saw and rated the photograph only condition scored mug shot photos as significantly trustworthiness, innocence, happiness, and calmness.

Paired samples t-tests comparing ratings for both the photograph and the psychological evaluation together versus participants who viewed the photograph and then the psychological evaluation revealed a significant difference for intelligence  $t(49)=4.91, p<.05$ , kindness  $t(48)=3.30, p<.05$ , honorableness  $t(49)=3.55, p<.05$ , respectfulness  $t(49)=4.73, p<.05$ , trustworthiness  $t(49)=3.73, p<.05$ , morality  $t(49)=4.97, p<.05$ , and innocence  $t(49)=2.42, p<.05$ . There was not a significant effect in the same instance for attractiveness  $t(49)=-.18, p>.05$ , happiness  $t(49)=.85, p>.05$ , or calmness  $t(49)=.80, p>.05$ . These results demonstrate that participants who saw the photographs and psychological evaluations together scored individuals in mug shots higher on all traits except attractiveness.

## **SECTION IV**

### **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study was to investigate whether mental illness symptoms had an impact on the judgement of individuals' mug shots. The primary hypothesis of this investigation was that participants would judge the individuals' mug shots more positively after finding out they had some sort of mental illness symptoms. However, the results demonstrate quite the contrary.

Participants perceived the individuals in the mug shots as less intelligent, kind, honorable, respectful, trustworthy, moral, happy, and calm when they viewed the evaluation after condition versus when they viewed the photograph only condition. Participants perceived the individuals as more trustworthy, innocent, happy, and calm when they viewed the photograph only condition versus when they viewed the simultaneous condition. Participants perceived the individuals as more intelligent, kind, honorable, respectful, trustworthy, moral, and innocent, when they viewed the simultaneous condition versus when they viewed the evaluation after condition.

These findings demonstrate that the order in which material concerning prisoners is important to perceived judgments. It is best to present the material with only a photograph and no psychological evaluation (whether after or with the photograph) because it produces a more positive judgement of the individual in the mug shot. When presenting a mug shot, presenting the individual's psychological evaluation simultaneously is optimal to elicit more favorable judgments of that individual.

This study, in relation to the articles mentioned in the introduction above, had a relevant population base since mental illnesses are prevalent in the prison system (Birmingham, 1996). The NCJRS article served as an outline seeing that their study compared offenders with and without mental illness (James, 2006). However, our study was novel in that it compared different, more subjective trait characteristics. Moreover, work showing that some offenders characteristics can be more harshly perceived based on the over exaggeration of crime in the media (Pfeiffer, 2005), could explain why our study found that certain traits were significantly affected by the mental illness stigma and others were not or were less so than other character traits. Thus, traits that are over exaggerated in the media may be one's that we observed significant effects in our study.

Further analysis of the data could be conducted to determine if our data shows younger offenders receive more positive ratings from the general public (Varma, 2007). Future research on this topic could compare judgements of those with and without mental illness during their first month out after parole (Visher, 2010), compare the number of individuals with and without mental illness that return to the criminal justice system (Nelson, 2011), or compare the employability of those released that do versus do not have mental illnesses (Cerda, 2014).

With this information we can conclude that mental illness symptoms do influence judgement on others and it provides a negative stigma. Although this does not support the original hypothesis, the results reveal how mental illness symptoms can impact a population's judgement.

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## APPENDIX

Please rate how you would consider your feelings/beliefs about this person?

Use a response scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

1. Intelligent
2. Kind
3. Honorable
4. Respectful
5. Trustworthy
6. Moral
7. Attractive
8. Innocent
9. Happy
10. Calm

1. Which traits do you believe impacted your perception the most? Least? Why do you think this is so?

You have the opportunity to skip this question.

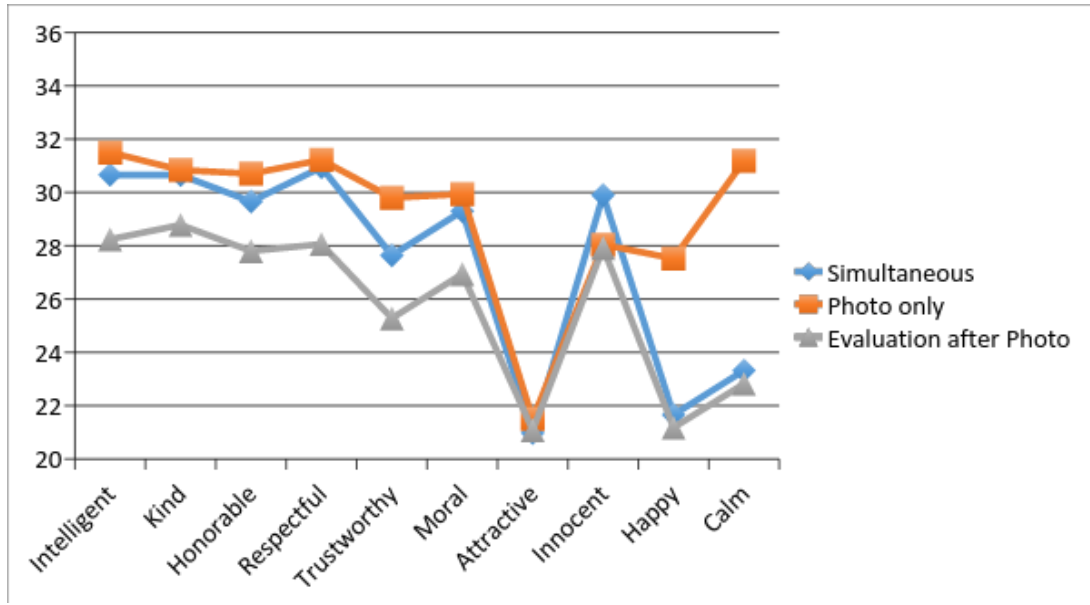
2. Have you ever experienced any of these symptoms described in the biographies you read about?

If so, feel free to explain.

You have the opportunity to skip this question.

3. Have you had a family member and/or close friend with any of these symptoms? If so, feel free to explain.

You have the opportunity to skip this question.



	Simultaneous	Photograph only	Evaluation after
Intelligent	30.66	31.5	28.24
Kind	30.65	30.84	28.78
Honorable	29.66	30.7	27.8
Respectful	30.94	31.22	28.06
Trustworthy	27.64	29.8	25.28
Moral	29.30	29.94	26.94
Attractive	20.98	21.5	21.08
Innocent	29.9	28.04	27.92
Happy	21.66	27.52	21.18
Calm	23.32	31.18	22.82