

A LINE ON LIFE

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Standing Out in a Crowd *

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Some people want to be noticed — and some don't. What makes others notice you? Does that make a difference in the way other people judge you?

Being noticed is related to being **salient** — having some quality that stands out. You are more likely to be salient, if something about you is in **contrast** to your surroundings. **Movement, repetition, intensity** and **novelty** are other perceptual factors that lead to salience. In other words, they draw attention to you.

The impression you make is determined by any factor that makes you stand out from those around you. If you come to class in a wheelchair, the main impression of others relates to your perceived handicap. Your clothes, hairstyle, and even your age, sex and race are secondary to this contrasting — and therefore salient — factor. Likewise, if a student runs screaming out of a typical classroom lecture, the motion and sound intensity are salient factors used in judging that person.

First, in contrast to less obvious cues, salient aspects get more **attention**. Second, salient people receive more **extreme evaluations** than people who do not stand out much. In 1977, psychologists did several experiments to the impression of a "solo" black student. This black was the only black in one class, while another class was split evenly among blacks and whites. In contrast to any black in the evenly divided group, the solo black was more salient. Evaluations of the solo black were more extreme. If the person was pleasant, the only black was judged more favorably. Likewise, if the only black was unpleasant, the judgment was more negative.

In addition, saliency increases the **consistency** of the judgment. Even if you only know the salient characteristic, you are likely to attribute other stereotyped characteristics that go along with that salient characteristic. Someone who is labeled as a "dope addict" — even though that is all we know about that person — is likely to be perceived as having criminal tendencies, weak moral character, being dishonest and so on.

Added to this salient factor is a **negativity effect** — negative information influences judgments more than positive information. People are more confident about impressions based on negative traits than those developed from positive traits. When both positive and negative traits are salient, they do not merely balance each other out. The negative traits seem to form a "**blackball**" effect — regardless of the positive traits a person possesses; one extremely negative trait produces an overall negative impression.

Let's take the current situation in which national champion ice-skater Tanya Harding is suspected of being involved with the attack on her competitor, Nancy Kerrigan, as an example. Even if Tanya is cleared of all charges and earns a gold medal in the Olympics, she will be remembered more for her connection with the attack. Since we have a generally positive view of Olympic competitors, this trait will stand out even more — giving it still greater emphasis.

**False rumors are more damaging to good people,
because the rumors are so salient.**

Why do negative aspects have such an extreme effect? Possibly it is because we have a **person-positivity bias** — positive evaluations of others are more common than negative ones. As rarer traits, negative aspects are more likely to stand out and be given more weight by observers. As we walk down the street,

most of us see "*average-looking*" people as generally positive. However, if one of these "*average-looking*" people would turn around to reveal a blemish the size of a quarter on one cheek, what would capture your attention? Not only would the blemish attract your attention, it would influence your perception of that person more than *all* the other characteristics you perceived. Look what has happened to our opinion of media ministers, since the sexual exploits of a few have been revealed. In contrast, we hear so much about marital infidelity among entertainers that any one affair doesn't seem to stand out. In other words, its effect does not seem to be as strong.

All of this can help us to better understand why slanderous rumors about a basically good person are so dangerous. Even if a negative rumor is not true, it stands out more than the other information. It is more likely to be remembered and more likely to change your perception of that person — especially an admired person. So — if you hear a rumor — it is better to check it out than to tell it to others.

* Adapted from David Sears, Letitia Peplau and Shelley Taylor's *Social Psychology*, Prentice Hall Publishers, 1991, pages 45-48.