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Speech 10

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I will describe a situation where a group of people misperceived me. The event was fraternity rush week at Cal State Fullerton. At this event I experienced examples of the implicit personality theory as well as the halo effect and stereotypes. Additionally, I will show how the social perception process applied equally to both the black and white fraternities.

On the first day of rush week, each fraternity is provided a table where literature is passed out and conversations are initiated between the recruiting members and the prospective "rushees". It is at this point the rushees discover the "personality" of each fraternity and the members feel out and provide feedback as to their interest level in the possible new recruits. I experienced negative reactions from the white fraternities in the form of statements made to me such as "You're probably not interested in us" or "We are not what you're looking for." while the black fraternities perceived me as an outsider due to my appearance. The ultimate indication of my rejection was the absence of any invitations to join a fraternity.

I realized that while the experience was indicative of a negative aspect of the social perception process, I have to share the blame for the outcome of the event. Understanding the implicit personality theory, the halo effect and stereotypes allows for a sharper understanding of the experience as well as a possible explanation for my success in the subsequent semester.

There is no possible way for a fraternity member to know exactly who I am in such a brief encounter, therefore they must use the principles of the implicit personality theory, which is defined as "the idea that each individual has his or her own theory of what people are like" (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977, p. 89), to evaluate me. One function of the implicit personality theory is the halo effect, which describes "information that is selected serves as the bases for inferences about other, unobserved qualities of a person." (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977, p. 136). The members of the black fraternities had an immediate negative reaction to me because I did not wear a necklace with a symbol of Africa that was worn by all the members of the fraternity and was popular at the time as a display of black pride. They therefore inferred that I disagreed with them on other "black issues" such as affirmative action and racism on campus. The briefness of the encounter did not allow the fraternity to see that this was not true.

Another function of the implicit personality theory is stereotypes. "Stereotypes are defined as overgeneralizations of group characteristics, which are used to describe and evaluate people of those groups." (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002, p. 41). The white fraternities evaluated me not as just a student but a black student. Assumptions were made of me that were based entirely of what they knew of black people, which illustrates the point that "although stereotypes have some positive functions, their outcomes are primarily negative." (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002, p. 41). The aggregate of the average fraternity

member's knowledge of blacks is that blacks and whites have problems getting along; therefore I would not make a good member if one were looking for cohesiveness.

The following semester I rushed again and was invited to, and eventually joined a fraternity. I was able to instinctively realize that I was not going to surmount the hurdles I faced in obtaining acceptance to a fraternity in the brief time allowed during the first day of rush week. I made an effort to attend a large number of rush events during the week to provide members with as much information about myself as I could. I identified myself as a member of other popular groups on campus to allow the aspects of the halo effect to work for me in a positive way. Realizing that there are stereotypes other than racial ones, I dressed as a serious student to appear as a member of a group that has a positive stereotype.

The implicit personality theory, halo effects, and stereotypes are natural processes that we use to evaluate people and events. While they can typically lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions, they can be used to ones advantage when they are understood.

References

- Hughes, P. C., & Baldwin, J. R. (2002). Black, white, and shades of gray: Communication predictors of "stereotypic impressions". *The Southern Communication Journal*, 68(1), 40.
- Wegner, D. M., & Vallacher, R. R. (1977). *Implicit Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.