

This Week's Citation Classic

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Kuethel J L. Social schemas. *J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol.* 64:31-8, 1962.
[Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD]

When people place representations of human figures on a field, their responses are organized rather than scattered or random. For example, children are associated with women, and women with men. This technique permits the study of both generic and specific social schemata in different populations. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI[®]) indicates that this paper has been cited over 150 times since 1966.]

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"My development of this technique for studying social cognition had its roots in observations that human behavior in certain social contexts is much more predictable than most psychology textbooks would lead us to believe. For example, I could ask 100 strangers at bus stops for the time and expect every one of them to glance at his watch and respond. Many social scientists have confined their investigations to phenomena that require carefully controlled conditions and powerful analyses in order to demonstrate an effect. I have long been interested in those social behaviors that are so pervasive that they appear 'obvious' and are seldom studied. I like Heider's statement, 'The veil of obviousness that makes so many insights of intuitive psychology invisible to our scientific eye has to be pierced.'¹

"What I needed was a technique that would allow subjects to organize social stimuli under conditions of minimal constraint. I wanted the free expression of social predilections which suggested a projective measure, but at the same time I wanted

to avoid the subjective scoring typical of such techniques. The solution came during a visit to an elementary school classroom. The teacher had a flannel board on which the children could place objects cut from felt. The nap permits the cutouts to adhere anywhere they are placed and with any orientation. In addition, when the objects are removed the field is again clear and ready for a new construction. This was just what I needed! A visit to a department store and an expenditure of less than \$5.00 for felt provided the 'apparatus' for a series of studies.

"Paper dolls were used as templates to cut out representations of men, women, and children which subjects placed on a large felt field stretched on my office wall. They were instructed, 'Place them in any way you want to.' As predicted, the subjects (in this study, male undergraduates at Johns Hopkins University) did not place the figures at random but instead employed specific high commonality social schemata. A child figure was placed next to a woman figure and nonhuman figures were not allowed to separate a male-female pair of figures. (By the way, the tables appearing in this *Citation Classic* article were composed by photographing the actual stimulus sets with high contrast film and then superimposing the frequencies with which each configuration was used.)

"The second part of the study demonstrated the pervasive nature of these schemata. Using a reconstruction technique, subjects attempted to accurately replace pairs of figures after viewing them with a fixed separation. Subjects erred in replacing male-female pairs too close together while the replacements of neutral stimuli were relatively accurate. This showed that under some conditions social schemata function as response sets. The technique has been extended in a series of subsequent investigations.²⁻⁴

"I believe that this study has received many citations because of the versatility of the technique and the fact that although it is projective, the relative distances of the placements can be objectively measured. Other investigations use different stimuli with different populations to test hypotheses unrelated to my initial purpose."

1. Heider F. *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley, 1958. 322 p.

2. Kuethel J L. The pervasive influence of social schemata. *J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol.* 68:248-54, 1964.

3., Prejudice and aggression: a study of specific social schemata. *Percept. Mot. Skills* 18:107-15, 1964.

4. Kidder S J & Kuethel J L. Children's parental schemata as related to reading achievement. *Percept. Mot. Skills* 40:971-3, 1975.