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**How we build our social world:  
Personality as a moderator of impression formation**

*Cum ne construim lumea socială:  
Personalitatea ca moderator al formării impresiilor*

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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Timișoara

2025

## Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

This doctoral thesis investigates the mechanisms by which individuals form impressions of others, focusing on key psychological processes such as evaluative conditioning (EC), halo effects, and spontaneous trait inference (STI). While these phenomena have traditionally been examined in isolation and described using distinct conceptual vocabularies, this research adopts the conceptual model presented in the Feature Transformation Framework proposed by De Houwer et al. (2019). This framework provides a conceptual structure for understanding how social features are transferred and transformed in the context of impression formation.

A central aim of this thesis was to examine how perceiver-level variables, particularly personality traits, modulate these impression formation processes. Although prior studies have acknowledged the importance of individual differences, research integrating personality dimensions into the mechanisms of feature transfer and transformation has remained limited. By incorporating established personality frameworks, specifically the Big Five (Soto & John, 2017; Zuckerman, 2002) and HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2018) models, this thesis offers a more nuanced view of how traits such as conscientiousness, emotionality, and openness influence social evaluations.

The thesis unfolds across two major lines of empirical inquiry, each aimed at clarifying different aspects of impression formation and personality moderation. In the following sections, I will outline the primary objectives of the research conducted in this thesis and provide a detailed overview of the chapter structure, illustrating how each chapter contributes to addressing these objectives.

### Research Lines and Empirical Structure

The first line of research (Chapter III<sup>1</sup>) employs a classical evaluative conditioning paradigm, where neutral target stimuli (conditioned stimuli; CSs) are paired with valenced source stimuli (unconditioned stimuli; USs). The core question is whether pairing affects not only the valence of the target but also other social and personality-relevant traits, such as trustworthiness or warmth. In three pre-registered experiments, the impact of CS-US pairings on both general

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<sup>1</sup> The three studies included in this chapter are published: Huzoica, F. G., De Houwer, J., Perugini, M., Rusu, A., & Sava, F. A. (2025). Beyond Valence Transfer in an Evaluative Conditioning Paradigm: On the Nature of the Phenomenon and Its Relation to Personality. *Collabra: Psychology*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.137108>

liking and specific features of the CS was investigated. This research extended beyond previous research with traditional EC paradigms by (1) examining not only changes in the liking of CSs but also changes in the ratings of other features of CSs and (2) considering the role of personality as a potential moderator of these effects.

The results were consistent across the three studies, providing robust evidence that the EC pairing procedures do not only result in feature transfer but also in feature transformation effects. Moreover, feature transformation, to a large extent, depended on changes in liking. However, this study contributes to the literature by directly assessing ratings of the specific features through a traditional EC procedure rather than using a reversed correlation method, thereby offering complementary evidence for these effects. These findings support the conclusion that pairing a neutral stimulus with a liked or disliked stimulus not only changes the liking of the originally neutral stimulus but also the evaluation concerning a broad range of other features of the neutral stimulus. As such it further highlights the importance of evaluative pairings for impression formation. Lastly, we did not observe a clear impact of personality on feature transfer, feature transformation, or the moderation of feature transformation by changes in liking.

The second line of research (Chapter IV) integrates spontaneous trait inference paradigms to examine how trait knowledge acquired through behavioral descriptions (competence and warmth) is transferred to new, unrelated individuals. First, we used an STI procedure to construct a learning context where participants were instructed to imagine they had just started a new job in a company and would get to meet their new work colleagues. This way, we manipulated the participants' impression of the source stimuli regarding competence and warmth, two traits of the social judgments' vertical and horizontal dimensions (Abele et al., 2021), by using the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske., 2018). Further, we used an evaluative conditioning paradigm presenting the source stimuli alongside new stimuli (targets) to investigate if the impression formed about the source stimuli can also be transferred to the target stimuli. Notably, it was observed that trait impressions of the target were shaped by prior exposure to source individuals, particularly along dimensions that were behaviorally manipulated. The findings contribute to the literature by creating a learning context that reveals how individuals form impressions of a target person based on information learned from a source person previously associated with the target (e.g., the source is highly competent but cold).

Moreover, this study identified significant moderating effects of emotionality and openness, highlighting the role of personality in shaping generalized impressions even in minimal exposure conditions.

To further extend the ecological validity and generalizability of the findings, Chapter V<sup>2</sup> introduces a group-level study examining whether patterns observed at the individual level also hold in evaluations of social groups. Participants evaluated groups characterized by contrasting profiles (*i.e.*, high competence but low warmth vs. low competence but high warmth), mirroring the dual-trait structure employed in earlier chapters. The results largely support our hypotheses and provide insightful observations regarding participants' perceptions of those individuals, which align closely with established stereotypes, reinforcing the dichotomy between competence and warmth.

### **Thesis Structure and Overview of the Chapters**

In Chapter I, the key concepts and the conceptual framework were introduced, focusing on how individuals make sense of the world through learning mechanisms such as evaluative conditioning (EC), halo effects, and spontaneous trait inference (STI), all of which are relevant to person perception and impression formation. The feature transformation framework is presented as a unifying model to understand how these phenomena interact in impression formation. Additionally, the role of the perceiver's personality in shaping these processes is discussed, highlighting the importance of considering individual differences in impression formation research.

Chapter II outlines the primary objectives of the research and presents the guiding research questions. It also provides an overview of the thesis structure, summarizing the content and purpose of each chapter.

In chapter III, the focus shifts to empirical research, specifically exploring feature transfer and feature transformation effects in an evaluative conditioning paradigm. The chapter introduces a pilot study, followed by two experiments that build on the initial findings with procedural modifications. The research examines whether the pairing of a neutral conditioned stimulus (CS) with a valenced unconditioned stimulus (US) influences not only the valence of the CS but also other features, such as trustworthiness. Additionally, the potential moderating effects of individual

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<sup>2</sup> This study was accepted in: Huzoica, F. G. (accepted). Building our Social World: Exploring group-level inferences of Competence and Warmth. *Romanian Journal of Applied Psychology*.

differences in neuroticism and agreeableness are assessed. Across three pre-registered experiments ( $N = 582$ ), findings indicate that CS-US pairings impact both valence and other CS features, though evidence for the moderating role of personality traits was mixed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, along with directions for future research.

Chapter IV extends this line of research by exploring and describing the similarities and differences between spontaneous trait inference (Garcia-Marques et al., 2022) and evaluative conditioning effects (Moran et al., 2023) in the context of person perception and impression formation, considering the perceiver's personality and using the feature transformation framework proposed by De Houwer et al. (2019). Two hundred and twenty-two participants completed a learning phase via STI where they learned about two source individuals who are either highly competent but cold at the workplace or are low on competence but warm at the workplace. In the following learning phase, the source stimuli appeared onscreen alongside the target stimuli. After this, they completed a post-experimental assessment and filled in a personality measure (HEXACO-60; Ashton & Lee, 2009). The results outlined a feature transfer effect for the manipulated traits, competence, and warmth. More specifically, participants evaluated the target stimuli following the initial manipulation of the source stimuli they were paired with. There was also an effect on the likeability ratings, as they went in the same direction with the warmth dimension. It was also found significant evidence for the moderating role of two personality dimensions, emotionality, and openness, in transferring the likeability from the source stimuli toward the target stimuli.

In Chapter V, a group-level evaluation study was included to investigate if the patterns of feature evaluation for the highly competent and cold individuals vs. incompetent and warm individuals can be replicated at a group level. The results supported the previous findings.

Chapter VI provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings from all the studies presented in the thesis. It critically evaluates the results, addressing the limitations of the research and considering the broader theoretical and practical of the findings. The chapter concludes by summarizing the main contributions of the thesis and suggesting directions for future research.

Chapter VII includes supplementary materials that support the research presented in this thesis. These may consist of additional information, detailed methodologies, details about data availability, and other relevant documentation that provide a deeper understanding of the studies

that were conducted. The appendices are organized to correspond with the chapters, ensuring that all necessary information is readily accessible for further examination.

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