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BEHAVIOR AS SEEN BY THE ACTOR AND AS SEEN BY THE OBSERVER

RICHARD E. NISBETT [1]

Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan

CRAIG CAPUTO, PATRICIA LEGANT, AND JEANNE MARECEK

Yale University

Jones and Nisbett proposed that actors are inclined to attribute their behavior to situational causes, while observers of the same behavior are inclined to attribute it to dispositional qualities—stable attitudes and traits—of the actor. Some demonstrational studies consistent with this hypothesis were described. College student observers were found to (*a*) assume that actors would behave in the future in ways similar to those they had just witnessed (while actors themselves did not share this assumption); (*b*) describe their best friend's choices of girlfriend and college major in terms referring to dispositional qualities of their best friend (while more often describing their own similar choices in terms of properties of the girlfriend or major); and (*c*) ascribe more personality traits to other people than to themselves.

The fact that different individuals often have very different views of the causes of a given person's behavior is a frequent theme of world literature. The diverse perspectives on the behavior of the central figure held by the central figure himself, the people whom he affects, the author, and the reader play an important role in works as varied as *Rashomon, Huckleberry Finn,* the "Grand Inquisitor" section of *The Brothers Karamazov,* Gide's *The Counterfeiters,* Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet,* and countless mystery novels. Psychologists, however, have for some reason rarely attempted to analyze the differing perspectives of the witnesses of a given act beyond the frequent observation that perception of motive tends to be in line with self-interest.

A pioneering exception to the psychologist's general lack of interest in this question is Heider's (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations.* Jones and Nisbett (1971) recently distilled from Heider's writings a very general hypothesis concerning the divergent perspectives of the actor—that is, the individual who performs a given behavior—and the observer of the behavior. They proposed that actors tend to perceive their behavior as a response to situational cues, while observers tend to perceive the behavior as a manifestation of a disposition or quality possessed by the actor. Evidence supporting this hypothesis, including work by Jones and Harris (1967), Jones, Rock, Shaver, Goethals, and Ward (1968), and McArthur (1972), is discussed in detail by Jones and Nisbett. The major reason for the divergent perspectives is probably a simple perceptual one. The actor's attention at the moment of action is focused on the situational cues—the environmental attractions, repulsions, and constraints—with which his behavior is coordinated. It therefore appears to the actor that his behavior is a response to these cues, that is, caused by them. For the observer, however, it is not the situational cues that are salient but the behavior of the actor. In gestalt terms, action is figural against the ground of the situation. The observer is therefore more likely to perceive the actor's behavior as a manifestation of the actor and to perceive the cause of behavior to be a trait or quality inherent in the actor.

A second probable reason for the differential bias of actors and observers stems from a difference in the nature and extent of information they possess. In general, the actor knows more about his past behavior and his

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Richard E. Nisbett, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

present experiences than does the observer. This difference in information level probably often serves to prevent the actor from interpreting his behavior in dispositional terms while allowing the observer to make such an interpretation. For example, if an actor insults another person, an observer may be free to infer that the actor did so because the actor is hostile. The actor, however, may know that he rarely insults others and may believe that his insult was a response to the most recent in a series of provocations from the person he finally attacked. The difference in information available to the actor and observer is, of course, reduced when the actor and observer know one another well but is always present to a degree.

The present report describes three different demonstrational studies which illustrate divergent perspectives of the actor and observer. The first study indicates that observers tend to assume that actors have a disposition to behave in the future in ways similar to those which they have just observed, while actors do not share observers' assumptions about their own future behavior. The second study shows that actors tend to attribute the cause of their behavior—specifically, choice of college major and girlfriend—to properties of the chosen entity, while they are more likely to attribute the similar choices of their close friend to dispositional qualities of their friend. The third study shows that actors tend to believe that they have fewer personality traits than do other people.

STUDY I

Study I presents data collected in the context of a larger experimental investigation of the perception of causes of behavior. An attempt was made to elicit or prevent, via differing monetary incentives, actors' cooperation with an experimenter's request. Observers watched all of the interaction between the experimenter and the actor. It was anticipated that observers but not actors would attribute the actor's compliance or noncompliance to a disposition on the part of the actor to comply or not comply with such requests in general and hence would expect the actor's behavior to generalize to other situations. The relevant details of procedure are presented below.

Method

Overview

College co-eds were recruited to participate in an experiment on "decision making." Present at each session were two real subjects and two confederates. One subject was randomly selected to be the observer and the other to be the actor. The confederates played the same role as the actor. The confederates and the actor were requested "before the experiment began" to volunteer some of their time to serve as weekend hostesses for the wives of potential financial backers of a university institute concerned with the learning disabilities of disadvantaged children. The confederates always volunteered, thus serving as models and agents of social pressure. In some experimental sessions, $.50 per hour was offered as token remuneration for the weekend's work; in other experimental conditions, $1.50 per hour was offered. After the actor had either volunteered or refused to volunteer, both the actor and the observer were taken aside and quizzed about their perceptions of the actor's behavior.

Instructions to the Observer

The subject who was randomly designated to be the observer was told that three other girls would be taking part in the experiment:

> They will be asked to make various decisions. You, however, will *not* be asked to make any decisions. . . . Your job will be to watch one of the participants carefully throughout the entire session, during which she'll be making various decisions. After a brief introductory session in which the experiment will be explained to the other girls, you'll join the girl you're to watch in another room, where the decision materials have been assembled.

Experimenter 1 then told the confederate that she would be watching the decision making of the actor (described as the girl who would be sitting in the left-most chair during the introductory session). Finally, the observer was told that she would be introduced as the experimenter's helper, since "we've found that people tend to feel self-conscious and unnatural if they think a non-participant is watching them."

Scenario

For the introductory session, the actor and confederates were led into an experimental room and seated in a row facing a desk at which Experimenter 2 and the observer sat. Experimenter 2 introduced herself and then introduced the observer as someone who would be helping in a later part of the experiment. Experimenter 2 briefly described a fictitious decision study procedure which allegedly would take place after the introductory session. Experimenter 2 then began the request which formed the core of the experiment:

Before we get started, though, I happen to have sort of a real decision for you to make. The Human Development Institute at Yale is sponsoring a weekend for the corporate board and a lot of their prospective financial backers. As you may know, the Institute is involved in basic research in learning and education. Right now, their focus is particularly on learning among the underprivileged and in minority groups. The Institute often works very closely with the psychology department, which is how I happen to be involved with them. Anyway, these supporters will all be coming to town the weekend of (a date two weeks hence) . . . . The committee thought that it would be especially appropriate to involve co-eds by putting them in charge of the wives of the businessmen. There will be some separate activities arranged for these women, and they'll probably be interested in seeing Yale from a woman's point of view. So the committee would like girls to volunteer. There will be 16 or 18 hours in all that you could volunteer for.

Experimenter 2 went on to briefly describe the various activities of the weekend (tours, receptions, etc.) and the times they would take place. Experimenter 2 then delivered the monetary incentive manipulation: "They have only limited funds to run the weekend, but they can afford to pay girls who volunteer $.50 ($1.50) an hour." Experimenter 2 then asked if the subjects had any questions. One of the confederates asked how long the session lasted on Saturday, and the other asked what date the experimenter had said the weekend would take place. Actors only rarely asked a question.

Experimenter 2 then asked the confederate seated to her right if she would care to volunteer. The confederate "volunteered" for about 4 hours. Experimenter 2 then asked the confederate seated next to the actor if she could volunteer. The second confederate volunteered for about 12 hours. Finally, the actor was asked if she could volunteer. Following the actor's response, the actor and observer were taken to separate experimental rooms.

Approximately half of the subjects were exposed to a slightly different version of the above scenario. The different version was intended as a low-social-pressure variation which might produce lower compliance rates among actors. In this variation, confederates left "to go to their separate experimental rooms," after announcing their willingness to volunteer, and on a pretext, the experimenter and observer left the actor alone to indicate on a card how many hours she was willing to volunteer. This variation did not in fact have a significant effect on compliance rate, and data were therefore pooled for purposes of analysis.

Assessment of Perceived Reasons for Volunteering

The actor was interviewed by Experimenter 1, whom she had not previously met. Experimenter 1 began,

Before we start in with the rest of the decisions, I'd like to ask you a few questions about the decision you just made. We decided to use the Institute's recruiting appeal as one of our experimental decisions, since it's so much like the kind of decision that you run into every day, as opposed to the sort that the rest of the session will be dealing with.

The actor was given "a list of some of the reasons that people give us for volunteering for this task" and asked to decide how big a part each reason had played in her decision to volunteer. The list of reasons had proved in pretests to be virtually exhaustive. Subjects were asked to rate the importance of each of the following reasons on a 0–8 scale:

1. I wanted to help the University and the Human Development Institute.
2. The activities sounded as if they would be interesting.
3. It was a chance to earn some money.
4. I thought that meeting the people would be fun.
5. The other girls seemed to be interested in it and that made me think it was probably worthwhile.
6. There was a lot of social pressure to volunteer.

The observer was questioned by Experimenter 2 about the actor's motives for volunteering, if the actor had volunteered. If the actor had not volunteered, the observer was questioned about the motives of the confederate sitting next to the actor. The same measures were used as those for the actor.

Assessment of Perceived Disposition to Volunteer

Following the assessment of motives, both the actor and the observer were asked to estimate how likely they felt it would be that the actor would volunteer to perform a similar social service task, specifically, to canvass for the United Fund. Subjects responded to the following scale:

How likely do you think it is that you (the girl you watched) would also volunteer to canvass for the United Fund?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
not at all likely			neither likely nor unlikely					very likely

Subjects

Subjects were Yale co-eds, some of whom participated for credit in an introductory psychology course and some of whom were paid $1.50 to participate. Altogether, 33 yoked actor–observer pairs participated in the study. However, through an error, disposition-to-volunteer data were not obtained for 5 of the actors.

Results

The monetary incentive offered was a very major determinant of the actor's choice of

whether or not to volunteer. Of the 17 actors offered $.50 per hour, only 4 (24%) volunteered. Of the 16 actors offered $1.50 per hour, 11 (68%) volunteered. *Among volunteers,* however, the amount of money offered did not much affect the *number* of hours volunteered. Volunteers offered $.50 per hour promised 5.6 hours on the average, and volunteers offered $1.50 per hour promised 6.7 hours ($t < 1$, ns).[2]

Best indications are that neither volunteers offered $1.50 nor their observers fully realized the importance of money in eliciting actors' cooperation. Volunteers offered $1.50 and their observers were agreed in rating the importance of money lower than they rated the importance of three other reasons—the desire to help, the interest of the activities, and the fun of meeting the people. This meant that all groups of actors and observers were free to assume that a disposition to volunteer or not to volunteer for such activities was responsible in part for the actor's behavior. To the extent that dispositional inferences were made, they should have been reflected in the subjects' predictions about the likelihood that the actor would volunteer for a similar task.

Table 1 presents the actors' and observers' estimates of the likelihood that the actor would volunteer to campaign for the United Fund. The left columns present perceived likelihood as a function of whether or not the actor volunteered. The right columns present likelihood estimates as a function of the payment offered. The left columns are more meaningful, but they suffer from the methodological defect that the volunteering variable is a self-selected one, and the subjects who volunteered might have been selectively different on some dimensions from those who did not. The right columns correct this defect but introduce some "slippage" into the manipulation, due to the fact that not all high-payment actors volunteered and not all low-payment actors failed to volunteer.

It may be seen in Table 1 that the actor's behavior prompted the observers to make dispositional inferences. Observers' judgments were uncorrelated with actors' judgments, and the data were accordingly analyzed by t tests assuming independence of the two sets of data. If the actor volunteered, observers saw her as more likely to help the United Fund than if she did not ($t = 2.24$, $p < .05$). Moreover, observers of volunteers saw them as more likely to help the United Fund than did the volunteers themselves ($t = 2.12$, $p < .05$), and observers of nonvolunteers tended to see them as less likely to help the United Fund than did the nonvolunteers themselves ($t = 1.63$, $.10 < p < .15$). The interaction between volunteering versus nonvolunteering and actor versus observer status is significant at the .07 level ($t = 1.91$).

TABLE 1

ACTORS' AND OBSERVERS' ESTIMATES OF THE PROBABILITY THAT THE ACTOR WOULD VOLUNTEER FOR A SIMILAR TASK AS A FUNCTION OF WHETHER OR NOT THE ACTOR VOLUNTEERED AND AS A FUNCTION OF THE AMOUNT OFFERED FOR VOLUNTEERING

Rater	Actor's behavior		Amount offered	
	Volunteered	Did not volunteer	$1.50/hour	$.50/hour
Actor	3.31	3.92	3.73	3.38
n	16	12	15	13
Observer	4.27	2.78	4.25	2.71
n	15	18	16	17

Ratings as a function of the payment variable show a similar pattern. Observers of the generally volunteering high-payment actors judged them, as a group, to be more likely to help the United Fund than did observers of the generally nonvolunteering low-payment actors ($t = 2.35$, $p < .05$). Among actors, the high-payment group did not differ from the low-payment group ($t < 1$). The interaction, however, falls short of significance.

It therefore appears that observers are inclined to make dispositional inferences from behavior under circumstances in which actors infer nothing about their general inclinations. It might be argued, however, that the dispositional inferences formed by observers in Study I were due solely to aspects of the experimental situation that were artificial and ecologically rare. Observers had never seen the actor before, there was no interaction between actor and observer, and the actor's behavior was limited to a sentence or two. It

[2] All p levels reported are based on two-tailed tests.

might be argued that actor–observer differences might not be found in less impoverished situations. On the other hand, it is important to note that in Study I virtually all of the situational stimuli impinging on the actor were also visible to the observer, and that fact should have militated against dispositional interpretation on the part of observers. In many situations in real life, we are likely to know more about the actor than did the observers in Study I, but we are likely to know less about the stimuli affecting his behavior. In fact, even when we know the actor extremely well, we may know virtually nothing about the stimuli guiding his behavior in a particular case. To the extent that this is true, we are thrown back once again on dispositional inferences in order to explain the behavior.

STUDY II

Study II was conducted in order to determine whether actors and observers would differ in their perception of the causes of behavior even when the actor is well known to the observer. Male college student subjects were asked to write a brief paragraph explaining why they liked the girl they dated most regularly and another brief paragraph explaining why they had chosen their college major. Subjects were also asked to write similar paragraphs about their best friend's choices of girlfriend and college major. It was anticipated that in explaining their own choices, subjects would emphasize the role of properties of the chosen object, and in explaining their friend's similar choices, they would be more likely to emphasize the role played by dispositions and traits of the choosing individual.

Method

Subjects for Study II, as well as subjects for Study III, were Yale undergraduate males, who were offered $1.50 to participate in "Person Perception Surveys" in groups of 6–20. Study II subjects had all filled out the personality trait questionnaires of Study III prior to providing data for Study II.

Thirty subjects were requested to write four brief paragraphs describing why they liked the girl they had dated most frequently in the past year or so, why they had chosen their major, why their best friend liked the girl he had dated most regularly in the past year or so, and why he had chosen his major. In addition, subjects were asked to put themselves in their best friend's position and try to write paragraphs as the best friend might describing why the *subject* had chosen his girlfriend and major. Order of answering for self, best friend, and for self as best friend might answer was counterbalanced. "Best friend" was defined for subjects as "your best friend of your own age and sex—if there is more than one candidate, choose the one you have known longest."

The subjects' paragraphs were scored for the degree to which they stressed "entity" versus "dispositional" reasons. Each reason was coded as being either a pure entity reason ("She's a relaxing person"; "Chemistry is a high-paying field") or as invoking some dispositional property of the actor ("I need someone I can relax with"; "I want to make a lot of money"). Reasons were coded as being dispositional if they referred in any way to the person doing the choosing. Reasons coded as dispositional therefore included many which could be described as Entity × Disposition interaction reasons. Thus, reasons such as "We have complementary personalities" or "We can relax together" were coded as dispositional.

Coding was performed by the investigators. However, protocols were also rewritten by changing all first person statements into third person statements and were given to a coder ignorant of the hypothesis. Results are reported in terms of investigator-coded scores, but the results are almost identical if scores from the blind coder are employed for the analysis.

Seven of the 30 subjects (or their best friend) did not have a girlfriend or had not yet chosen their major field. Data for such subjects were excluded, leaving 23 cases for the analyses presented. Conclusions would not be altered, however, if the analyzable portions of the data from the 7 subjects were included.

Results

It was anticipated that subjects would tend to describe their own choices of girlfriend and major field as being due to properties of the chosen entity and would tend to see the comparable choices of their best friend as being due to dispositions possessed by their friend. It may be seen in Table 2 that this is the case. When explaining why they liked their own girlfriend, subjects gave more than twice as many reasons phrased in terms referring exclusively to properties of the girl than reasons phrased in terms of their own needs, interests, and traits ($t = 2.54$, $p < .02$). In contrast, when explaining why their best friend liked his girlfriend, subjects gave almost equal numbers of reasons referring exclusively to the girl and reasons involving dispositions of their friend ($t < 1$, *ns*). The interaction between answers for self versus

friend and entity versus dispositional wording is significant at the .05 level ($t = 2.23$). When explaining why they had chosen their major, subjects gave an almost equal number of entity reasons referring exclusively to properties of the major and dispositional reasons referring to their own needs, interests, and traits ($t < 1$, *ns*). In contrast, when explaining why their best friend had chosen his major, subjects gave almost four times as many reasons involving dispositions possessed by the friend as they gave reasons referring exclusively to the major ($t = 3.53$, $p < .002$). The interaction between answers for self versus friend and entity versus dispositional wording is significant at the .10 level ($t = 1.79$). The tendency to give relatively more entity reasons for self was obtained regardless of the order in which subjects wrote the paragraphs.

It is interesting to note that subjects were remarkably capable of adopting the perspective of an outside observer of their own behavior. When asked to write paragraphs explaining their choices of girlfriend and college major as they thought their best friend would see it, they virtually duplicated the pattern in Table 2 for explanations of their friend's choices. For girlfriend choices, 2.65 entity reasons were given versus 2.57 dispositional reasons. For major field choices, .39 entity reasons were given versus 2.22 dispositional reasons. These responses differ hardly at all from the responses given for the best friend's choices.

It is possible that the data in Table 2 do not reflect a phenomenal difference in the perception of self versus others but merely a difference due to language usage. For example, people may be in the habit of assuming that their hearers or readers know them personally and therefore do not feel obliged to describe their own dispositions. They may take it as understood that they need a warm, relaxing girlfriend but may feel it necessary to point this out about a third person. Of course, the experimenters did not know the subjects any better than they knew the subjects' best friend, but habitual patterns of expression may have prevailed over such rational considerations. Language conventions might have affected the results in a second way. Subjects

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF ENTITY REASONS AND DISPOSITIONAL REASONS GIVEN BY SUBJECTS AS EXPLANATIONS OF THEIR OWN AND THEIR BEST FRIEND'S CHOICES OF GIRLFRIEND AND COLLEGE MAJOR

Explanation	Reasons for liking girlfriend		Reasons for choosing major	
	Entity	Dispositional	Entity	Dispositional
Own behavior	4.61	2.04	1.52	1.83
Friend's behavior	2.70	2.57	.43	1.70

Note. $N = 23$.

tended to describe their girlfriend with sentences that consisted of strings of admiring adjectives and were less likely to do this when describing their best friend's girlfriend. These adjective strings resulted in high scores for entity attribution but may have had less to do with the subjects' views of causality than with their use of a rhapsodic convention for describing one's true love. Finally, it may have been that simply writing in the first person versus the third person led in some grammatical or structural way to differential focus on the object versus the subject of the sentence. If such a tendency existed, it may have been this, rather than an ability to "reverse perspective," which caused subjects to duplicate the pattern of results for the best friend's choices when describing their own choices (in the third person) from the point of view of the friend.

The language usage alternative loses some force, however, in view of the results of a follow-up study in which subjects were asked not to generate, but merely to rate the importance of, reasons for dating a particular girl and for choosing a particular major. A list of 16 reasons for dating a girlfriend, drawn from reasons suggested by Study II subjects, and 12 reasons for choosing a major, drawn mostly from Study II reasons, were given to 31 subjects who rated each reason for themselves and for their best friend on a 5-point scale. Half of the reasons were worded in entity terms ("She's intelligent"), and half were worded in dispositional terms "I need someone I can relax with"). Alternate forms of the questionnaire were constructed, such

TABLE 3

RATINGS OF MOST IMPORTANT REASONS FOR CHOOSING GIRLFRIEND AND MAJOR AS A FUNCTION OF ENTITY VERSUS DISPOSITIONAL WORDING

Choice	Entity wording	Dispositional wording
Own	3.99	3.75
Friend	3.44	3.62

Note. $N = 31$.

that each reason that appeared in entity terms on one appeared in dispositional terms on the other.

The pattern of responses observed in Study II was not found for all of the items in the follow-up questionnaire, but it was found for virtually all of the reasons rated by subjects as relatively important. As it happened, the seven reasons for dating a girlfriend most frequently given by subjects in Study II all received average ratings of 3.5 or more in the follow-up study, and none of the other reasons received ratings as high as 3.5. These reasons involved the attractiveness, intelligence, relaxedness, naturalness, sexual responsiveness, and the fun-loving and affectionate qualities of the girl or the need for these things on the part of the person doing the choosing. For all seven of these reasons, subjects endorsed the entity-worded form relatively more strongly for self than for best friend. Four of the reasons for choosing a major received ratings as high as 3.5 (involving intellectual rewards, freedom of approach, breadth of interests covered, and route to an understanding of the world). For all except the last of these reasons, subjects endorsed the entity-worded form relatively more strongly for self than for best friend. (As a group these reasons had been only somewhat more commonly listed by Study II subjects than reasons rated as relatively unimportant by follow-up subjects.)

Table 3 presents mean importance ratings of the 11 reasons which received overall ratings of 3.5 or higher. The table combines ratings of reasons for choosing a girlfriend and reasons for choosing a major since the results are entirely similar for each of these categories separately. It may be seen that subjects tended to assign higher importance to reasons stated in entity terms when answering for themselves and tended to assign higher importance to reasons stated in dispositional terms when answering for their best friend. The interaction is significant at the .05 level ($t = 2.11$).

The follow-up study does not rule out all possible linguistic explanations of the findings of Study II, but it does speak against artifactual explanations having to do with language *production*. Subjects stressed entity attributions for themselves and dispositional attributions for their best friend, and this was true both when they described choices in their own words and when they merely rated reasons in language provided by an experimenter. Thus, it is not likely that the findings of Study II merely reflect stylistic or structural constraints due to writing in the first versus the third person.

More importantly, it should be noted that the potential interest of Study II would not necessarily be diminished if it could be shown that the findings were due largely to hidden conventions of language usage. Kanouse (1971) has argued persuasively that the language used to describe an event greatly affects subsequent attributions: When a given causal candidate is stressed in speech, it is likely to become more prominent phenomenally. It seems entirely plausible that if people are in the habit of using entity terms to describe their own behavior and dispositional terms to describe that of others, this linguistic fact would have phenomenal repercussions.

STUDY III

Subjects appear to be inclined to interpret the behavior of other actors in relatively dispositional terms, whether the behavior is routine and inconsequential or highly personal and important, and whether they know the actors well or not at all. One possible consequence of this tendency to view the behavior of others in more dispositional terms than those employed for one's own behavior is that each individual may view every other individual as possessing more personality traits than he himself possesses. If everyone views his own behavior as a response to the situational stimuli he confronts at the moment but perceives more transituational stability in

the behavior of others, he should perceive the behavior of others to be more trait determined than his own. In order to examine the possibility that individuals view themselves as relatively trait free, the following study was undertaken.

Method

Procedure

Twenty-four subjects filled out questionnaires indicating, for themselves and four other stimulus persons, which of three descriptions best fit the stimulus person: a trait term, its polar opposite, or the phrase "depends on the situation." Subjects responded to a total of 20 such three-choice items for each of the stimulus persons. Questionnaire booklets were arranged so that for the group of subjects as a whole, the questionnaire for each stimulus person preceded the questionnaire for every other stimulus person equally often. On a final questionnaire, subjects rated the desirability of each of the 40 polar traits on a 7-point scale (−3 to +3).

Trait Terms

The trait terms employed are presented in Table 4. An effort was made to use trait adjectives that were socially desirable, since it would have been uninteresting to show that people refuse to assign trait descriptions to themselves when both trait alternatives are undesirable. The effort to avoid employing undesirable traits was largely successful. Only 2 of the 40 terms received a mean rating of less than neutral (tough-minded and deferential). An effort was also made to create trait pairs of equal desirability, so that the factor of desirability would enter as little as possible into the subject's choice. This effort was largely unsuccessful. For about half of the pairs, the 2 trait terms were rated as being significantly different in desirability. It was therefore necessary to analyze trait pairs which differed in desirability separately from those which did not.

Stimulus Persons

The stimulus persons employed were self, best friend, father, an admired acquaintance ("some individual of your own age and sex whom you like, but have known less than three months"), and the television commentator Walter Cronkite. This sample of stimulus persons was certainly not random or exhaustive, but it did have some useful properties. The stimulus persons had in common the fact that most subjects could be presumed to be favorably disposed toward them. Just as it seemed wise to avoid using trait terms which could be epithets, it seemed wise to avoid using stimulus persons toward whom subjects would be inclined to hurl them. The stimulus persons differed systematically along two dimensions: their similarity to the subject in age status and their familiarity to the subject. Two stimulus persons were the same age as the subject, and two were older. Two were among the people best known to the subject, and two were relatively unfamiliar. These differences allowed for an examination of the effects on trait attribution of two variables of some interest.

TABLE 4

POLAR TRAIT TERMS USED IN STUDY III

Polar trait term	
Serious–gay	Skeptical–trusting
Subjective–*analytic*	Quiet–talkative
Future oriented–present oriented	Cultivated–*natural*
Energetic–relaxed	*Sensitive*–tough-minded
Unassuming–self-asserting	Self-sufficient–sociable
Lenient–firm	Steady–*flexible*
Reserved–*emotionally expressive*	Dominant–deferential
Dignified–*casual*	Cautious–*bold*
Realistic–idealistic	Uninhibited–self-controlled
Intense–*calm*	*Conscientious*–happy-go-lucky

Note. Where trait terms differ in social desirability at the .05 level or more, the trait higher in social desirability is italicized.

Results

It was anticipated that subjects would attribute fewer personality traits to themselves than to other people. It may be seen in Table 5 that this was the case. Subjects were significantly more likely to apply the depends-on-the-situation category to themselves than to any other stimulus person. The order in which subjects filled out the sheet for self was without effect on the tendency to ascribe more traits to others than to self. Neither familiarity with the stimulus person nor similarity in age, in themselves, appeared to have had much influence on the tendency to ascribe traits, although subjects were somewhat more

TABLE 5

MEAN NUMBER OF TRAIT ASCRIPTIONS (OF A POSSIBLE 20) TO EACH STIMULUS PERSON

Item	Stimulus person				
	Self	Best friend	Father	Acquaintance	Cronkite
Mean trait ascriptions	11.92[a]	14.21[bc]	13.42[b]	13.42[b]	15.08[c]

Note. Means not sharing a superscript differ from each other at the .05 level or more; $N = 24$.

likely to ascribe traits to Walter Cronkite, the older, unfamiliar stimulus person, than to other stimulus persons. The tendency to attribute more traits to others was as stable across subjects and trait dimensions as it was across stimulus persons. The tendency was reversed for only 4 of the 24 subjects and for only 2 of the 20 trait dimensions (reserved–emotionally expressive and cautious–bold).

The finding that people ascribe more traits to others than to themselves is of considerable interest if it genuinely reflects a tendency to hold a different implicit personality theory for the self than for others. The finding is of much less interest if it merely reflects a tendency to present the self in a more favorable light than others. Such a tendency could have accounted for the present data in two ways. If subjects had found one or both traits of a given pair to be undesirable, they might have used the depends-on-the-situation category as an "escape hatch" for themselves but might have been more willing to assign a questionably desirable trait to someone else. Or, a desire to present oneself favorably might have produced the present results if subjects had been using the depends-on-the-situation category as a means of stating that they were neither too much one way nor too much the other but just right. If so, the greater use of the depends-on-the-situation category for self does not reflect a denial of traits but the assertion that the subject occupies the golden mean on trait dimensions.

Evidence is readily available for the possibility that subjects used the depends-on-the-situation category in order to avoid ascribing relatively undesirable traits to themselves. It is recalled that subjects were asked how desirable they felt each of the 40 traits to be. Two subsets of trait dimensions were defined for each subject on the basis of his desirability ratings. The first subset consisted only of trait dimensions where the subject had rated each trait term neutrally or positively and where there was no more than 1-scale-point difference between the two in desirability. The second subset consisted of trait dimensions where the subject had rated one or both terms negatively or where the discrepancy between the two was greater than 1 point. (As it happened, there were for the group as a whole almost equal numbers of trait dimensions in the two subsets—10.21 in the first and 9.79 in the second.) The results of this analysis are incompatible with the self-esteem or self-presentation alternative. The tendency to attribute more traits to others than to self was actually somewhat *more* marked among traits of the first subset, which were neutral or desirable and about equal in desirability, than among traits of the second subset, in which traits differed in desirability or were undesirable or both. This indicates that subjects were not merely using the depends-on-the-situation category in order to avoid describing themselves unfavorably.[3]

A remaining alternative explanation of the trait ascription data is that subjects were not denying that they possessed traits but merely asserting that they occupied an ideal middle ground on the trait dimensions. This possibility could not be assessed with the available data. A follow-up study, however, allowed for an assessment of this possibility. This study was essentially a replication of the first study, employing the best friend as the only stimulus person. One major change was made in the format, however. Instead of presenting subjects with a choice among two polar trait terms, subjects were presented with a more conventional 6-point trait continuum, together with the depends-on-the-situation option prominently displayed to the left of the continuum. Subjects were more likely to use the depends-on-the-situation category for themselves than for their friend ($p = .06$) but, if they checked a category of the continuum, were no more likely to use the middle two categories for themselves than for their friend. Subjects in Study III thus probably checked the depends-on-the-situation alternative not because they wished to present themselves as

[3] It should be noted in passing that, while the internal analysis indicated that self-esteem or self-presentation motives did not produce the tendency to ascribe more traits to others than to self, there did exist a tendency to ascribe more favorable traits to the self. The mean desirability of traits ascribed to self was higher than that for any other stimulus person. This tendency was nonsignificant for the comparison of self with best friend, of borderline significance for the comparison with acquaintance, significant for the comparison with Walter Cronkite, and highly significant for the comparison with father.

possessing traits in moderation, but because they perceived themselves as possessing fewer traits.

The follow-up study also provided an opportunity to further explore the effect of familiarity with the stimulus person. Subjects were asked how long they had known their best friend. Answers ranged from a few months to 19 years. The correlation between the length of time subjects had known their best friend and the tendency to ascribe more traits to best friend than to self was $-.45$ ($p < .01$). Thus, subjects were increasingly unwilling to assign traits to their best friend the longer they had known him, and it would appear that, at least within a status category, greater familiarity with the stimulus person results in responding to the stimulus person in the same way as to the self.

DISCUSSION

All three studies provide evidence in support of the hypothesis that actors attribute causality to the situation while observers attribute causality to the dispositions of the actor. Observers in Study I presumed that actors would behave in the future in ways similar to those they had just witnessed, while actors did not share this assumption. Subjects in Study II tended to describe their choices of girlfriend and college major in terms referring to the properties of the chosen object but were more likely to describe the similar choices of their friend in terms referring to dispositional qualities of their friend. Subjects in Study III indicated that they believed themselves to have relatively fewer broad behavioral dispositions—traits—than their friends and thus, presumably, to be relatively more likely to behave in accordance with the demands of specific situations.

The findings of each of the studies undoubtedly could be explained without resort to the hypothesis proposed by Jones and Nisbett (1971), and even taken as a whole, the studies cannot be said to indicate that the hypothesis generally holds true. The studies should be regarded merely as demonstrations of some interest in their own right, which are consistent with a proposition that is too widely applicable to be either proved or disproved by anything short of a very large and extremely variegated research program.

Actually, genuinely persuasive support for Jones and Nisbett's (1971) proposition is not likely to result simply from piling up a large number of instances in which it holds true. Much more effective support would be given by studies directly testing the presumed mechanisms on which the proposition rests. An excellent example of such a study was provided by Storms (1973), who demonstrated that the attributional biases of actors and observers are reversed when they are shown videotapes reversing their normal visual perspective. When actors are shown videotapes focusing on their own behavior and observers are shown videotapes focusing on the actor's situation, actors attribute their behavior to dispositional causes more than do observers. This reverses the attributional pattern that obtains when actors and observers do not see such videotapes and strongly supports Jones and Nisbett's contention that the individual's perspective channels his causal inferences.

The present framework rests exclusively on mechanisms of information processing and availability. However, a denial of motivational effects on processes of causal inference is not intended. On the contrary, the present view may be easily integrated with the view that motivational factors, such as the desire to maintain self-esteem, or to present oneself in a favorable light, or to denigrate or exonerate other people, sharply affect causal inference. It seems plausible that at least one such motivational factor, probably acting in concert with informational factors, played a role in the present studies. Brehm (1966) has written at some length on the "reactance" motive, or man's desire to see himself as free and able to control events that are important to him. Such a motive is probably best served when the individual perceives himself to act in accordance with the demands and opportunities of each new situation as it arises. If the individual were to perceive himself as motivated by traits and overriding dispositions, he would have to perceive himself as having less freedom and flexibility of action. On the other hand, the individual's sense of freedom should be enhanced to the extent that he perceives

others to possess broad behavioral dispositions. The more predictable the behavior of others, the more the individual can perceive the social environment to be stable and understandable and therefore controllable.

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