

An optimistic origin for naïve causal theories of attributions

## ***Introduction***

Is there such a thing as a “good person”? Perhaps not, suggest Ybarra and colleagues (Ybarra and Stephan, 1996, Ybarra, 2002), at least not in terms of the attributions observers make. According to Ybarra and colleagues, there is a pervasive tendency for people to use the negative behaviors of others to make dispositional attributions—that is, to pinpoint the cause of the negative behavior as specific to the actor. Conversely, positive behaviors engender situational attributions. The differential usage of positively and negatively valenced behavior in making attributions suggests that any negative behavior on the part of an individual eliminates him or her from “good person” status in the eyes of others. Moreover, Ybarra’s (2002) contends that positive and negative behaviors are asymmetrically processed because of a pervasive belief that social norms enforce positive behaviors, while any negative behavior represents a break with the social structure. This explanation further limits the potential of people to be good; apparently, we only do good things because we have to. Within the confines of the naïve causal theories individuals use to make attributions, then, it seems there can be few good people.

Ybarra’s explanation for the negativity bias in attributions may be needlessly pessimistic, however. What if negative behaviors were seen as diagnostic for dispositions not because of a cynical belief in the power of norms, but because of an optimistic view of human nature? I argue that the naïve causal theories documented by Ybarra and colleagues derive from an expectation that people will engage in positively valenced behaviors. When this expectation is violated, the offending negative behavior is scrutinized and used to make a dispositional attribution. Although this alternate

explanation does not redeem the fallen “good people” who engaged in negatively valenced behaviors, it does offer some hope for the observers. After all, they view the world not as cynics, but as optimists, if this alternate explanation holds true.

This paper will develop the premise that, in the absence of any reason to believe otherwise, people expect others to behave positively. In the following paper I will refer to Ybarra’s (2002) explanation for naïve causal theories of attributions as the “pessimism hypothesis,” and to my competing theory as the “optimism hypothesis.” According to the optimism hypothesis, when the expectation of positive behavior is violated, observers engage in deep cognitive processing of the negative information in order to reconcile incongruencies between it and the positive expectations they had for the target. Because many negative behaviors are relatively more diagnostic of traits than corresponding positive behaviors, the negatively valenced behaviors have a greater impact on attributions; that is, negatively valenced behaviors are more likely than positively valenced behaviors to be attributed to dispositional causes. After developing this argument, this paper will reinterpret selected studies from Ybarra’s (2002) review using the premise of positive expectations. Finally, this paper will briefly discuss potential empirical investigations of the optimism hypothesis.

### ***Overview***

Psychology has firmly established that individuals, in order to make sense of their social worlds, make attributions about the behavior of others (Heider, 1944, Ross, 1977). These attributions may be either dispositional or situational. Dispositional attributions suppose that the behavior occurs as a result of something specific to the actor; for instance, a personality trait or an idiosyncrasy. Situational attributions, on the other hand,

suppose that the behavior is motivated by something external to the actor, such as another person or a particular set of circumstances. One persistent phenomenon revealed in psychological research is known as the fundamental attribution error or the correspondence bias (Ross, 1977, Gilbert and Malone, 1995). The correspondence bias refers to the tendency of observers to make dispositional attributions for other people's behavior, but situational attributions for their own. Although this bias is not found consistently across cultures (Fiske, Kityama, Markus, and Nisbett, 1998), it is a hallmark of North American psychology.

Recently, Ybarra has documented a second attributional bias which also appears to be quite robust. According to Ybarra (2002), people have "naïve causal theories" about others' behavior which they use to organize their social environment. These naïve causal theories rely on the valence of behaviors—that is, whether the behaviors are evaluated as positive or negative--in making attributions about the actor. Ybarra has found that while positively valenced behaviors usually prompt situational attributions, negatively valenced behaviors are more likely to result in dispositional attributions.

As discussed in the introduction, Ybarra posits that naïve causal theories preferencing dispositional attributions for negatively valenced behavior and situational attributions for positively valenced behavior may be the result of a generally pessimistic view of unknown individuals. Specifically, he hypothesizes that an individual enacting a positively valenced behavior may be viewed as adhering to strong social pressures, rather than revealing any meaningful dispositional information. At the same time, any individual who enacts a negatively valenced behavior must be resisting these same strong social pressures, and therefore offering information about his or her disposition. In other

words, naïve causal theories rely on negatively valenced behaviors for dispositional attributions because they are in fact more diagnostic about an actor's disposition.

In this paper, I argue that there is another possible reason for the preferencing of negatively valenced behaviors for dispositional attributions. Specifically, I argue that it is the optimism of observers, rather than the pessimism, which causes negatively valenced behaviors to make a stronger impression upon observers. Because people have a generally optimistic view of others (Reeder, Henderson, and Sullivan, 1982, Rothbart and Park, 1986, Ybarra and Stephan, 1999), it is surprising to them when somebody engages in a negatively valenced behavior. People believe that they live in a world of good people, and are surprised by instances suggesting otherwise. Research has shown that information that is incongruent with expectations is processed more deeply and remembered better than congruent information (Hastie and Kumar, 1979, Hastie, 1984, Srull, Lichtenstein, and Rothbart, 1985); therefore, I expect that a negatively valenced behavior, being inconsistent with positive expectations for the actor, will be more salient to the observer when making attributions than a positively valenced behavior.

If it is optimism, and not pessimism, behind naïve causal theories of valenced behaviors, then positively valenced behaviors *would* be less diagnostic than negatively valenced behaviors, but for different reasons than the ones offered by Ybarra (2002). Ybarra predicts that positively valenced behaviors will be interpreted as the outcome of social norms; conversely, I predict that positively valenced behaviors will be interpreted as intuitive reactions to environmental stimuli. Observers will assume that actors will engage in positively valenced behaviors because that is just what people do. Because the actor is behaving as any normal person would, his or her behavior is not diagnostic about

him or her as an individual. As a result, a situational attribution for the behavior is made. Negatively valenced behavior, on the other hand, disconfirms the expectation that the actor will have the “natural” positive reaction to environmental stimuli, and is therefore considered diagnostic of the actor’s disposition.

The optimism hypothesis, then, makes two predictions for why negatively valenced behaviors would elicit dispositional attributions. First, negatively valenced behavior violates observer expectancies and will therefore be processed more deeply and remembered better. Second, just as with the pessimism hypothesis, positively valenced behaviors will be seen as less diagnostic of the individual. However, the optimism hypothesis predicts that positively valenced behaviors are expected of good people, while the pessimism hypothesis emphasizes that they are enforced by social norms.

### *Optimistic expectations*

Considerable research indicates that people expect positive behavior from others when they are not given reasons to expect negative behavior. For instance, when subjects are asked how likely a target person is to behave in a particular fashion, they are significantly more likely to predict that the target will enact a positive behavior (Reeder, Henderson, and Sullivan, 1982). Likewise, subjects believe that there are more opportunities in the course of normal social interaction to engage in positively valenced behaviors than negatively valenced behaviors (Rothbart and Park, 1986). Moreover, although Ybarra and Stephan (1999) found that participants rated a dispositionally oriented target as more likely to enact negatively valenced behaviors than situationally oriented targets, there was nonetheless an impressive main effect across all four studies

such that positively valenced behaviors were more expected regardless of the target's orientation.

Moreover, some research indicates that Western cultures such as the United States are characterized by high levels of generalized interpersonal trust (Yamagishi, 1996, Yamagishi, Cook, and Watabe, 1998). In an argument that is surprisingly similar to Ybarra's (2002) pessimism hypothesis, Yamagishi and colleagues claim that a highly organized and rule-based social structure in Eastern nations enables people to trust each other. However, high levels of collectivism in Eastern cultures make it difficult for people to trust others who are not members of the same in-group, and who are therefore not subject to the same social structure. However, more individualistic Western cultures are characterized by a general sense of trust for both in- and out-group members which exists independent of an enforcing social structure. There is, then, merit in the premise that people are optimistic regarding others' behavior, particularly in cultures such as the United States.

### ***Violating expectations: Cognitive responses to surprise***

There is evidence that information which is incongruent with expectations is processed differently than congruent information. This differential processing helps to explain why negatively and positively valenced behaviors are used differently in making attributions. Research has shown that incongruent information will be recalled more frequently than congruent information (Hastie and Kumar, 1979, Hastie, 1984, Srull, Lichtenstein, and Rothbart, 1985). Even as the overall amount of information increases, information which is incongruent with expectations remains proportionally more salient in memory (Hastie and Kumar, 1979). This is true regardless of whether the expectations

are themselves positive or negative. The violation of expectations can also induce greater processing of related information, such as the message provided by the target (rather than just the inconsistencies themselves; Baker and Petty, 1994; Ziegler, Diehl, and Ruther, 2002). Surprising information, then, elicits deeper processing and higher rates of recall.

In fact, some research has indicated that strongly held expectations are more likely to engender differential levels of processing for congruent and incongruent information than weakly held expectations. As Srull et al. (1985) point out, strongly held expectations may require only one piece of disconfirming evidence to be disproven, whereas weakly held expectations can support several pieces of disconfirming evidence, because uncertainty is already built into the expectation. Therefore, if we assume that people strongly expect others to enact positively valenced behaviors, we can explain many of the findings of differential processing of positively and negatively valenced behaviors.

Hastie (1984), in his investigation of why incongruent information is better remembered than congruent information, demonstrated that incongruent information engenders causal attributions. When participants were given sentence beginnings that were either consistent or inconsistent with an impression they had formed of a target and asked to complete the sentences, they were significantly more likely to produce causal phrases than any other type of phrase when given an inconsistent sentence beginning. In other words, when faced with incongruence, participants searched for a causal attribution to reconcile the inconsistency. A second experiment, in which participants were restricted in the type of elaboration they were allowed to provide, illustrated that the generation of causal attributions increases the likelihood that the incongruent information



will be remembered. Thus, information about behaviors which are inconsistent with expectancies for the target result in increased processing of the information, and, consequently, increased memory for the information. Theoretically supplementing this work, Srull and Wyer (1989)'s model of person memory suggests that the relatively greater recall of expectancy-inconsistent items is due to a greater number of associative pathways formed between those behaviors and the person concepts that has been developed. According to this model, expectancy-inconsistent behaviors are better remembered because they are more deeply processed.

In a related set of experiments, Ybarra, Schaberg, and Keiper (1999) examined social information processing and impression formation. They, like Hastie (1984), found that participants who had formed impressions of a target were more likely to remember those target behaviors which were inconsistent with their expectations. However, for participants who had positive expectations for the target, more information was recalled overall than for participants with negative expectations. Moreover, negative expectancies were related to attentional decrements and a lack of cognitive engagement in impression formation. These studies extend Hastie's (1984) work by demonstrating differential effects of positive and negative expectations on the recall of subsequently presented information. In the next section, I argue that one reason why positive and negative expectations affect recall of congruent and incongruent information differently is due to the diagnosticity of positive and negative information for person judgments.

### ***Diagnosis: Disposition or situation?***

The optimism hypothesis predicts that positively valenced behaviors are expected under most circumstances. In the absence of any information to suggest otherwise,

individuals expect that the people they encounter will enact positively valenced behaviors. Therefore, in a situation where positively valenced behaviors are consistent with expectations, these behaviors have little diagnosticity. That is, positively valenced behaviors do not transmit any new information about the actor, but rather confirm what the observer already suspects: This person is good and is behaving like any good person would behave. In fact, Reeder and Brewer (1979) explain that people hold schematic representations of personal attributes which can be used to predict the diagnosticity of a given behavior for making dispositional attributions. Specifically, many behaviors, such as those determined by ability or morality, can be classified according to a *hierarchically restrictive schema*.

The hierarchically restrictive schema assigns behavioral restrictions to individuals who fall at one extreme of a trait continuum, while individuals classified at the other extreme are not behaviorally restricted. As a result, people falling at one extreme of the continuum are expected to show more variance in their behavior than people at the other end. For example, an exceptionally honest person who is classified at one extreme of the honesty continuum must be honest at all times in order to retain that classification. An exceptionally dishonest person, on the other hand, may enact a mix of honest and dishonest behaviors without requiring reclassification. Therefore, since both honest and dishonest people do behave honestly sometimes, honest behaviors cannot be used to make a reliable dispositional attribution. On the other hand, since only dishonest people do dishonest things, dishonest behaviors can be used to reliably diagnose a target's dispositional properties.

Accordingly, Reeder and Brewer (1979) predict that for traits belonging to hierarchically restrictive schemata, behaviors which violate expectations related to that trait will be asymmetrically diagnostic of the individual's disposition. Reeder and Brewer (1979) discuss these schemata using the example of honesty/dishonesty, which happens to be a dimension along which negatively valenced behaviors are more diagnostic; others, such as intelligence/unintelligence, have positively valenced behaviors as the more diagnostic information. According to the hierarchically restricted schema model, some negatively valenced behaviors, such as those implicating morality, inform us about an individual's disposition not because of our readiness to think ill of others, but because of the nature of the trait continuum to which the behavior belongs. In fact, consistent with Reeder and Brewer's (1979) hierarchically restrictive schemata, Skowronski and Carlston (1992) found that intelligent behaviors had a larger impact on impression formation than unintelligent behaviors. This represents a reversal of the negativity bias in attributions and supports the notion that more diagnostic behaviors will be attributed dispositionally.

Behaviors classified along a hierarchically restrictive schema should theoretically be evaluated consistently in spite of expectations. Within a given hierarchically restrictive schema, some types of behavior will always correspond to only one extreme of the trait continuum, while other types are common to both extremes. Whether or not a person expects a target to be honest or dishonest will not change the fact that a dishonest behavior can be used to make a reliable dispositional attribution, while an honest behavior cannot. This line of reasoning suggests that the power of negatively valenced behaviors to influence dispositional attributions is not due to an underlying suspicion of

humankind, but rather to an attempt to accurately judge others. Negatively valenced behaviors exert influence over dispositional attributions through the dual pathways of cognitive responses to surprise, and asymmetrical diagnosticities. The negativity bias documented by Ybarra (2002) can therefore co-exist with a generally optimistic expectation for other people.

***Re-evaluating Ybarra's evidence***

For us to accept the optimism hypothesis as an alternative to Ybarra's (2002) pessimism hypothesis, it should be able to provide a consistent explanation for the pattern of results reviewed by Ybarra (2002). Ybarra talks about research in five domains (person memory, epistemic processes, impression change processes, using old judgments in new circumstances, and the permanence of people's judgments and their confidence in them) supporting the claim that negatively valenced behaviors are preferred for dispositional attributions. In order to test the explanatory power of the optimism hypothesis, I review one study, previously explained by Ybarra in terms of the pessimism hypothesis, from each domain and re-explain it in terms of the optimism hypothesis.

***Person memory:*** Trafimow and Finlay (2001) investigated the explanatory powers of three models of person memory in situations where participants had multitrait expectations of the target. Specifically, rather than expecting the target to be simply (un)kind or (un)intelligent, participants expected targets to be some combination of (un)kind and (un)intelligent. The results indicate that information inconsistent with positive expectations is better remembered than both consistent information, and information inconsistent with negative expectations. Ybarra (2002) interprets these results as indicating the weakness of positive expectations; they are easily changed with disconfirming evidence, while negative expectations, being stronger, can withstand

disconfirming instances. Recall, however, Srull et al.'s (1985) explanation of how *weak* expectations may be more likely to withstand disconfirming evidence than strong expectations, because there is ambiguity built into the expectation. By applying this explanation to the Trafimow and Finlay (2001) findings, we can see how a strongly held positive expectation of the target, created by a combination of natural optimism about others and experimenter instructions, would be susceptible to disconfirming evidence. On the other hand, weak negative expectations, created by experimenter instruction without the added force of native beliefs, can withstand contrary evidence.

***Epistemic processes:*** In two experiments examining the types of information people seek when learning about their partner in an interdependent task, De Bruin and Van Lange (2000) found that participants prefer to learn morality information about their partner than competence information. Moreover, when the morality information is negative (i.e., the target is described as immoral), participants do not account for additional competence information in their overall impressions of the target, while they do account for the additional information when they have received positive morality information (notably, these results do not hold when the participant actively searches for information about the target; they are just as likely to seek competence information when negative morality information is given as when it is positive). These results indicate that negative morality information is sufficient to form an impression of the target, while positive morality information is not. Finally, participants spend more time reading negative morality information than positive morality information.

Ybarra (2002) uses the De Bruin and Van Lange (2000) results to support the pessimism hypothesis of attributions by claiming that their results are the product of the

tendency to view positively valenced behaviors as socially enforced and negatively valenced behaviors as dispositionally driven. However, the optimism hypothesis can also explain these results. Specifically, the fact that participants spend more time reading and processing negative than positive morality information suggests that the negative information is inconsistent with their expectations for the target (see Hastie, 1984). Additionally, even unexpected negative information about a target is likely to be more diagnostic than positive information, particularly when it pertains to morality (Reeder and Brewer, 1979). Participants in De Bruin and Van Lange's (2000) study could make a reasonable estimate of their partner's future behavior after learning that he or she was immoral, but learning that he or she was moral simply informed the participants that their partner was a typical, morally sound person. Therefore, it is not surprising that negative moral information curtailed the impact of positive competence information, while positive moral information increased the impact of both negative and positive competence information. The De Bruin and Van Lange (2000) results are entirely consistent with the optimism hypothesis.

***Impression change processes:*** Reeder and Covert (1986) asked participants to form an impression of a target who had performed either three moral behaviors or three immoral behaviors. Then, after they had formed an initial impression, targets were presented with a fourth behavior, inconsistent with the three they had already read. Participants required more time to process this fourth, incongruent piece of information than they did to process the initial three piece of information, indicating that the incongruent item required greater mental processing. Additionally, participants' final

impressions of the target were more influenced by a final, incongruent negative item than a final, incongruent positive item.

Clearly, Reeder and Coover's (1986) results demonstrate the attributional negativity bias documented by Ybarra (2002). Moreover, these results can easily be explained by the optimism hypothesis; in fact, Reeder and Coover (1986) themselves offer an explanation which fits nicely with the optimism hypothesis. Namely, because the incongruent fourth piece of information cannot be easily integrated into the existing impression, more time is required to process it. In other words, information which is inconsistent with expectations generates greater levels of processing. Also, as Reeder and Coover (1986) explain, while immoral people may exhibit moral behaviors most of the time, moral people are expected to behave morally all the time. Therefore, incongruent information about an immoral act performed by a target previously thought to be moral is more diagnostic than incongruent information about a moral act performed by an immoral target. For this reason, the negative incongruent information influences the final impression more than the positive incongruent information. This explanation is completely consistent with the optimism hypothesis, which similarly predicts that negative information is likely to be integrated into a dispositional attribution because it is both unexpected and diagnostic.

***Using old judgments in new circumstances:*** In a series of experiments investigating how participants use a previous judgment about a target in making a subsequent judgment about a target, Lingle and Ostrom (1979) found that positive and negative traits impacted judgments differently. Participants were given a series of traits describing a target person and asked to evaluate the target's suitability for a series of

professions. In all conditions, the second judgment about the target was largely based on the first; however, when the target's personality traits were positive (thus creating a positive expectation of the target's fit for a given profession), there was a delay in making the second judgment. This delay did not occur when the participant had negative expectations for the target based on the first judgment.

Lingle and Ostrom (1979) theorize that the delay in making the second judgment under conditions of positive expectations is the result of a memory search for any negative or disqualifying information about the target. Ybarra (2002) interprets this search as evidence that participants are less certain about targets for whom they have positive expectations, thus indicating the primacy of negative expectations; he does not further explore why these negative expectations might trump positive information. The optimism hypothesis, on the other hand, does provide an explanation for why negative expectations seem to fulfill the impression formation needs of participants. The optimism hypothesis explains the delay in decision-making as a function of the diagnosticity of the information known about the target (see Reeder and Brewer, 1979). When negative information is available about the target, the participant can easily judge them as unsuitable for a profession without searching for further justification. However, when the overall expectation for the target is positive, the participant must first ascertain that there is no disqualifying evidence before judging the target as suitable for the profession. While Ybarra's (2002) interpretation of Lingle and Ostrom's (1979) results would suggest that participants with positive expectations hesitate before making a second judgment because they lack confidence that the target will fulfill those expectations, the optimism hypothesis predicts instead that the delay is due to the diagnostic ambiguity of



the available information. Therefore, the delay is not the result of uncertainty per se, but rather of the non-diagnosticity of positive information relative to negative information.

*Permanence of judgments and people's confidence in them:* Carlston (1980) had participants learn about a target person, John Sun, who exhibited either positively or negatively valenced behaviors, or ambiguously valenced behaviors (having both positive and negative elements). All participants, however, learned both positive and negative information about John over the course of the experiment. Some participants rated John immediately after learning about him, while others returned after a week's delay to give their final impressions. Carlston found that participants were more confident in their negative judgments than in their positive ones when they returned after a week, and that they recalled negative episodes more accurately. Moreover, while both positive and negative judgments of John moved toward the neutral point over time, the positive judgments did so to a greater degree. In other words, negative judgments appeared more stable over time than positive judgments.

Carlston (1980) labels this effect "the negativity bias," and Ybarra (2002) takes these results as support for the pessimism hypothesis. These results, however, are also consistent with the optimism hypothesis. That is, negative information is more meaningful than positive information because it individuates the target. If most people would enact positively valenced behaviors, then it is meaningful if an individual does otherwise. As a result, the negatively valenced behavior is processed more deeply, and remembered more accurately and confidently over time. If people naturally expect others to enact positively valenced behaviors, then witnessing a person doing so should not trigger any effortful encoding processes. If, however, people naturally expect others to

enact negatively valenced behaviors, then it would be positively (and not negatively) valenced behaviors which are better remembered over time.

### ***Empirical tests***

The true merit of the optimism hypothesis will be determined with empirical testing. Since the predictions of the optimism hypothesis deviate from Ybarra's (2002) work only in the initial *a priori* expectations an observer has for a target, the predictive validity of the optimism hypothesis relative to the pessimism hypothesis can be empirically tested by manipulating expectations for a target's behavior. Because the optimism hypothesis is based on cognitive responses to information that is inconsistent with expectations, we should find results paralleling the negativity bias documented by Ybarra (2002) in situations where the expectation for the target are initially negative. One set of potential studies, then, would examine whether a positivity bias exists when initial expectations are negative. Bearing in mind Srull et al.'s (1985) caution that strong expectations are more susceptible to disconfirming evidence than weak expectations, these studies should create strongly negative expectations for targets. One way to accomplish this, according to social identity theory, might be to make targets members of particularly disliked outgroups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Of course, in order to find support for the optimism hypothesis, any replications of empirical work on the negativity bias using a different set of expectations needs to ensure that the positively valenced behavior is diagnostic of underlying traits. For example, as Skowronski and Carlston (1992) indicate, positively valenced behaviors are diagnostic of performance traits such as intelligence, while negatively valenced behaviors are diagnostic of morality traits, such as honesty. These results can be explained as the

result of hierarchically restrictive schemata (Reeder and Brewer, 1979). Intelligent people can enact unintelligent behaviors from time to time, while unintelligent people will never enact intelligent behaviors. Conversely, dishonest people can behave honestly sometimes, but honest people will never behave dishonestly. Any test of the relative merits of the optimism and pessimism hypotheses must keep the diagnosticity of target behaviors in mind.

Since much of Ybarra's (2002) rationale for the pessimism hypothesis depends on the presence of societal sanctions for negatively valenced behaviors, it would be interesting to examine how people think others would behave in an unstructured environment. Although popular cultural references such as *The Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954) suggest that anarchy would develop in the absence of regulations, the optimism hypothesis would predict that most people would expect the opposite to happen. That is, most people would expect others to continue enacting positively valenced behaviors even without a social structure to encourage them. Ybarra's reasoning, on the other hand, seems to predict outcomes more consistent with *Lord of the Flies*; without rules to constrain behavior, people will allow their true dispositional qualities to show, and enact negative behaviors. The differing predictions of the two hypotheses with regards to decontextualized behavior can be tested through survey studies (similar to many of the methodologies used in the attribution research cited in this paper; see Carlston, 1980, De Bruin and Van Lange, 2000).

Potential positivity biases in the presence of negative expectations and native predictions for human behavior in the absence of social structure, then, provide two methods through which the competing predictions of the optimism and pessimism

hypotheses can be tested. If initial studies confirm the validity of the optimism hypothesis, as work on expectations for others (Reeder, Henderson, and Sullivan, 1982, Yamagishi, 1996) suggests it will, then a future direction may be to reinterpret attribution studies with regard to the optimism hypothesis.

### ***Conclusion***

An alternative explanation for Ybarra's (2002) findings that people's naïve causal theories use negatively valenced behaviors for dispositional attributions and positively valenced behaviors for situational attributions is that people have strong optimistic expectations for others' behavior. While Ybarra suggests that a reliance on social norms to produce positive behavior, rather than faith in human goodness, is responsible for the preferencing of negatively valenced behavior for dispositional attributions, I argue that in fact people expect others to engage in positively valenced behaviors and therefore process negatively valenced behaviors more deeply when they occur. Which of these hypotheses better explains the data remains to be tested.

It is possible that both pessimism and optimism may drive the use of negatively valenced behaviors in making dispositional attributions under different circumstances. For instance, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) would suggest that people would have more optimistic expectations for ingroup members than outgroup members. Accordingly, it is possible that attributions for outgroup members follow the pessimism hypothesis while attributions for ingroup members follow the optimism hypothesis. This would be particularly true in times of intergroup conflict.

Another possibility is that individual differences may determine the motivation for differential processing of positive and negative information. Srull et al. (1985)

suggest that locus of control may partially account for the types of attributional processes a person engages in (p. 340). Factors such as level of prejudice may also moderate the relationship between behavioral valence and type of attribution. A highly prejudiced individual, for instance, may have negative expectations for a member of the target group, in which case Ybarra's (2002) pessimistic hypothesis would provide a more adequate explanation than the optimistic hypothesis.

In addition to dispositional explanations for the negativity bias, situational factors should also be considered. For example, Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991) found that participants who were highly motivated to process information because they believed their opinions would be influential in the marketing of a product systematically evaluated all of the material presented to them, regardless of whether the material was internally consistent or not. On the other hand, when participants believed their opinions were of little importance, they only engaged in systematic processing when the presented materials were internally inconsistent. The laboratory situation devised by Maheswaran and Chaiken has some interesting parallels to personal relationships. Perhaps the negativity bias holds true for people with whom one does not have an important relationship—for example, the target person in a laboratory study. But for people with whom a relationship is more important, such as a friend (or potential friend!), a person will engage in more systematic processing of their behavior and therefore avoid a negativity bias. In fact, Ybarra (2002) points out that the naïve causal theories described in his research have low predictive validity for close personal relationships. Maheswaran and Chaiken's (1991) findings suggest that perhaps motivation to carefully process information could explain this difference.

The negativity bias in attributions described by Ybarra (2002) seems to contradict the notion that human beings trust each other. In fact, the optimism hypothesis predicts that this negativity bias is partially a *result* of the positive expectations people have for those around them. If people did not expect others to behave positively, then they would not attend to negatively valenced behaviors. Perhaps, even with the existence of negatively biased naïve causal theories of attributions, there are good people in the world after all.

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