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ABSTRACT

Considerable evidence has been found to support the hypothesis that actors' and observers' attributions diverge. It is also becoming clear that this divergence is not the result of a single process, but is the result of factors which co-occur and differentiate actors from observers. Observers' beliefs about their similarity to actors were manipulated in two studies to see whether attributional differences between actors and observers covary with informational differences. In the first study, 90 male undergraduates served either as actors, similar observers, or dissimilar observers. Actors either succeeded or failed in changing another's attitude. Significant actor-observer effects occurred on most attribution measures: open-ended internality, actor's motivation, task difficulty, and luck. Similar observers' attributions almost always fell between actors' and dissimilar observers' attributions. In the second study, 175 observers rated a fictional other's personality as less dependent "on the situation" when s/he was more dissimilar. The results support an informational, rather than a perspective or motivational explanation for the actor-observer divergence. (NRB)

Perceived dissimilarity: An informational basis for the actor-observer divergence.

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Abstract

Two studies manipulated observers' beliefs about their similarity to actors. In Study 1, 90 male undergraduates served either as actors, similar observers, or dissimilar observers. Actors either succeeded or failed in changing another's attitude. Significant actor-observer effects occurred on most attribution measures: open-ended internality, actor's motivaton, task difficulty, and luck. Similar observers' attributions almost always fell between actors' and dissimilar observers'. In Study 2, 175 observers rated a fictional other's personality as less dependent "on the situation" when s/he was more dissimilar. Results support an informational, rather than perspective or motivational explanation for the actor-observer divergence.

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Perceived dissimilarity: An informational basis for the actor-observer divergence

In the decade since Jones and Nisbett (1972) proposed that actors' and observers' attributions diverge, considerable evidence has accumulated to support their hypothesis (see Kelley & Michela, 1980, and Watson, 1982, for recent reviews). It is also becoming clear that this divergence is not the result of a single process, but results from several factors which frequently co-occur and differentiate actors from observers.

First, there are informational differences. Actors know their own past behavior, so they can detect behavior which is inconsistent and make appropriately situational attributions. There is evidence that observers underestimate cross-situational variations, and thus over-attribute dispositions (Lay, Ziegler, Her ‹field & Miller, 1974; Lenauer, Sameth & Shaver, 1976). Second, there are perspective differences. Perceptually salient events and objects are seen as more causal (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), so that observers who normally attend to the actor can be made more situational by shifting to the actor's perspective (Storms, 1973). And actors can be made less situational by shifting their attention to themselves (Arkin & Duval, 1975). When the events are fictional (Bower, 1978) or drawn from memory (e.g., Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973, Study II), subjects readily adopt a series of imaginal perspectives and give the divergent causal attributions that would be expected from each. And third, there are motivational differences. Actors may be egocentrically more concerned than observers with attributing at least their failures to situations.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies in the literature which directly manipulate this first set of factors, informational differences between actors and observers. The present studies did that, to see whether

attributional differences between actors and observers covary with informational differences. This was done by manipulating observers' beliefs about their similarity to the actors. If observers believe they are similar to an actor, then they should ascribe their own behavioral variability to the actor and avoid the over-attribution of dispositions. In addition to observers' perceived similarity to the actor, we also manipulated the actors' outcomes in Study 1, because the actor-observer effect has been found most reliably for failure.

Our major hypothesis was that when actors and observers diverge significantly in their causal attributions, this will be due to differences between actors and dissimilar observers; actors and similar observers either will not diverge at all, or will diverge less.

Study 1

Method: The study was a 2(Outcome) x 3(Similarity) factorial design. Ninety men from Introductory Psychology volunteered for the study. All had taken a battery of personality and attitude scales during class, earlier that semester.

Actors reported to the laboratory where they found the other "subject" (a confederate) also waiting. First, both "subjects" filled out two questionnaires "similar to those you filled out" earlier in class, because "some attitudes change over time." The questionnaires were collected, and then the main part of the study was described as focusing on "what makes up an effective or persuasive message." The subject was "randomly" chosen to deliver the message to the confederate. A three-part message was provided in writing by the experimenter, and advocated abolishing schools (Reimer, 1971). The subject silently rehearsed each 200-250 word part of the message for several minutes until he was ready, and then read it to the confederate as convincingly as possible. The confederate announced his degree of agreement or disagreement with each part at its conclusion. The Outcome manipulation

consisted of the confederate's statement of his agreement with each part of the message, and overall.

Observers were scheduled in small groups of two to four, for a study of social persuasion. They viewed a videotape of one persuasion attempt, and then answered questions about it. The videotape presented a staged version of either the Success or Failure condition above. Observers filled out the attitude questionnaries, were given copies of the speaker's message when those events occurred on the tape, and they filled out a set of dependent measures almost identical to the actors'.

The Similarity manipulation had two parts. First, before the tape began, observers were told either that (for Similar Observers) this videotape had been selected for them because the speaker in it was similar to them on the test battery they had take earlier that semester; or that (for Dissimilar Observers) such a matching process was considered but proved to be impossible. Second, observers were given bogus attitude questionnaires "which the speaker on the videotape filled out", and were asked to rate how similar they were to him. These questionnaires were either very similar to, or very dissimilar from each observer's questionnaire. After the observers rated how similar they were to the speaker on a 7-point scale, as a manipulation check, the videotape was played to its end. After the persuasion attempt, all subjects rated the outcome, and described and rated its causes by distributing 100 points among the speaker's ability, motivation, the task, and luck.

Results

All measures were subjected to a 2 (Outcome) X 3 (Similarity) ANOVA, with dfs = 1,84. The Outcome manipulation check yielded significant effects for Outcome, $F = 99.75$, $p < .001$, and no significant interaction. The open-ended attribution measure yielded a significant Outcome X Similarity interaction, F

= 3.32, $p < .05$; other Fs < 1.0. Cell means are shown in Table 1. As hypothesized, similar observers' attributions were in between actors' and dissimilar observers' attributions, within each outcome condition. In addition, dissimilar observers saw success as more externally caused than failure, $t = 2.63$, $p < .02$. They also tended to see it as more external than either actors or similar observers, ts = 1.85, $p < .10$.

The ability ratings showed no significant effects (all Fs < 1.0).

Motivation ratings showed effects for Outcome, $F = 6.45$, $p < .05$, and Outcome X Similarity, $F = 4.25$, $p < .05$. As hypothesized, within both the success and failure conditions, similar observers were between the other subjects. In addition, dissimilar observers saw motivation as more causally important for failure than for success, $t = 3.51$, $p < .01$, and more important for failure than actors did, $t = 2.81$, $p < .01$.

Task ratings yielded a significant interaction, $F = 4.11$, $p < .05$; see Table 1. Again as hypothesized, similar observers' means were between the other subjects' means. In addition, dissimilar observers rated the task as less causally important for failure than success, $t = 2.27$, $p < .05$; less important for failure than actors did, $t = 2.97$, $p < .01$; and tended to rate it less important for failure than similar observers did, $t = 1.86$, $p < .10$. Actors tended to see the task as more causally important for failure than for success, $t = 1.76$, $p < .10$.

Luck was rated more important for success (10.6) than failure (6.1), $F = 5.31$, $p < .05$. And there was a significant interaction, $F = 3.77$, $p < .05$. Actors saw luck as more important for success than for failure, $t = 3.57$, $p < .01$, and more important for success than did either similar observers, $t = 2.08$, $p < .05$, or dissimilar observers, $t = 1.87$, $p < .10$. Table 1 shows that similar observers fell between the other subjects' means only in the failure

condition.

Thus on four of the five causal attributions, there were significant differences among the three levels of Similarity (Actor, Similar Observer, Dissimilar Observer). These were all in interactions with Outcome. Our major hypothesis was that any actor-observer divergences would occur between actors and dissimilar observers, rather than similar observers. The means for these attribution measures are shown in Table 1. They are in the predicted order in seven out of eight cases. The sole exception is for luck and success, where the departure is small.

The absence of main effects for Similarity means that actor-observer divergences, across outcomes, did not occur. Actors were not generally more situational than observers on any of the measures. However within Outcome conditions, 3 of the measures showed the divergence Jones and Nisbett described. Motivation (dispositional) was more important for dissimilar observers than actors, $p < .01$, for failure. The task (situational) was more important for actors than dissimilar observers, $p < .01$, for Failure. And Luck (situational) was more important for actors than similar observers, $p < .05$, for Success. There were no significant differences between cell means in the opposite direction. Thus, the expected divergence id occur within some outcome conditions; and when it did occur, it was greatest for more dissimilar actors.

Since Study 1 involved success and failure, it is possible that results were due to ego-enhancement or ego defensive motivations. Study 1 also provided no direct test of whether perceived dissimilarity decreases the assumed variability, or situational dependence of behavior, as hypothesized.

Study 2

One hundred seventy-five undergraduate volunteers examined an abbreviated questionnaire like that used in Study 1, presumably completed by another undergraduate, to form an impression of that person. The bogus questionnaires were either typical or atypical of these undergraduates. Then they rated that person on 20 personality traits, or indicated for each trait that the other's behavior "depends on the situation" (after Nisbett, et al., 1973). Finally, they rated how similar the target person was to themselves. No outcomes were involved.

Typical target persons, i.e., those whose questionnaires were most similar to the average subject, had more behaviors which depended on the situation (r = .17, p = .013). However, the correlation between similarity ratings and behaviors depending on the situation did not reach significance for the entire sample (r = .09, p = .115). These two correlations were both significant for women (r = .29, p = .001. and r = .19, p = .021, respectively), but not for men ($rs < .11$, $ps > .20$, n = 64). Differences between women's and men's rs (Fisher's r to Z transformation) were significant, $p < .01$. Thus, at least for women, greater similarity produced more perceived variability and less dispositional attribution, as hypothesized. To the extent that the actor-observer divergence depends upon seeing others' behavior as less variable across situations, this effect will tend to be greater for dissimilar others.

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TABLE 1

Outcome (Success, Failure) X Similarity (Actor, Similar Observer, Dissimilar Observer) Cell Means (ns = 15), for significant ANOVAs

	Outcome	Similarity		
		Actor	Sim. Ob.	Dis. Ob.
1. Open-ended causal attribution for outcome; 0 = external, 1 = internal	Success	0.53	0.53	0.20
	Failure	0.40	0.47	0.67
2. Importance of "Motivation (how Hard you tried)"; 0 to 100	Success	23.67	21.00	16.67
	Failure	20.40	29.00	35.33
3. Importance of "The task (various aspects of the experiment)"; 0 to 100 points	Success	36.00	40.00	44.93
	Failure	50.93	41.47	25.67
4. Importance of "Luck (chance, coincidence, etc.)"; 0 to 100	Success	15.00	8.00	8.73
	Failure	3.00	7.33	8.00