Interpersonal Engagement in Social Perception: The Consequences of Getting into the Action

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This study examined the effects on person perception of varying levels of observer-actor engagement. Subjects observed a male actor (confederate) responding to interview questions on a prerecorded videotape under three conditions of interpersonal engagement. Subjects in a detachment condition knew that they were simply observing a tape; subjects in an anticipated interaction condition knew that they were observing a tape but expected to interact subsequently with the actor; subjects in an actual interaction condition thought that they were interacting with the actor over a video hook-up. Half of the subjects in these conditions observed the actor preface his responses with a positive comment regarding the interviewer's question (positive actor); the other half observed the actor preface his responses with a negative comment (negative actor). It was predicted that anticipated interaction observers would demonstrate hopefulness by attributing the positive actor's behavior dispositionally and the negative actor's behavior situationally but that actual interaction observers would show the opposite causal attribution pattern in an attempt to protect or enhance their own self-esteem. Results confirmed these predictions. Trait inference and attraction, however, were primarily affected by the actor affect manipulation. Discussion centers on the different manifestations of observer self-concern in social contexts and on the conceptual independence among person-perception variables.

The study of social cognition is predicated on the assumption that mental representations of people are intimately and causally associated with social behavior. Recent research has examined one aspect of the cognition-behavior relationship, namely, the ways in which an observer's preconceptions about an actor influence subsequent interaction between the observer and the actor (e.g., Messé, Stollak, Larson, & Michaels, 1979; Snyder & Swann, 1978). However, the converse causal relation—how on-going social interaction affects the development of person judgments—has been relatively ignored. Yet, it is a simple and obvious fact of everyday life that person perception typically occurs in a context of observer-actor engagement, and it is reasonable to assume that identifiable features of such contexts reliably affect such judgment phenomena as causal attribution, trait inference, and attraction. The purpose of the present study was to generate insights into the nature of these effects.

It is useful, first of all, to distinguish among three general levels of observer-actor engagement. The lower boundary of engagement is detachment; this level is characterized by passive, nonreciprocal observation, with no opportunity for direct communication between observer and actor. Detachment would seem to represent the majority of past and present person-perception paradigms. Anticipated interaction represents a second level of engagement. Like the detached observer, the observer at this level is not presently communicating with the actor, and observation is nonreciprocal. However, the observer expects that, subsequently, he or she will interact directly with and be observed by the actor; in this sense, the observer is phenomenologically engaged with the actor. Several studies in recent
years are relevant to an understanding of person perception at this level of engagement (e.g., Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Cunningham, Starr, & Kanouse, 1979; Harvey, Yarkin, Lightner, & Town, 1980; Miller & Norman, 1975; Miller, Norman, & Wright, 1978; Wolfson & Salancik, 1977). Finally, an observer may be actively engaged with the actor in that there is reciprocal communication and observation; these features, of course, are the defining characteristics of social interaction.

Given the difficulties in exercising rigorous experimental control over live face-to-face observer–actor interaction, it is understandable why there is a dearth of research examining this level of engagement. Even if the actor is a confederate who behaves according to a prearranged script, the nature of live interaction makes it virtually impossible for the actor to deliver identical verbalizations for all observer subjects, let alone provide identical paralinguistic, semantic, and kinesic information. In the present study, however, we developed a paradigm in which face-to-face social interaction could be contrasted with anticipated interaction and detachment without a sacrifice in experimental control. In brief, this was accomplished by manipulating subjects' beliefs about their involvement with an experimental confederate who responded to job interview questions on a prerecorded videotape. Some subjects were informed that they were in fact simply observing a tape; others were also informed of this but expected to interact subsequently with the person (i.e., conduct a second interview); and still others believed that they were observing the person "live," that they were elicitng the person's behavior (with interview questions), and that they were being observed simultaneously by the person. Crossed with this engagement factor was a manipulation of actor affect: In one tape version, the actor demonstrated positive affect toward the interviewer; in the other version, the actor demonstrated negative affect. In both versions, the factual information provided by the actor in response to the questions was exactly the same; only the actor's apparent attitude toward the interviewer distinguished the two tapes.

It is commonly held that social cognition is motivated by a desire for effective control of oneself and one's environment (Kelley, 1967). We contend, however, that this general concern manifests itself differently as a function of observer–actor engagement and that these specific manifestations can, in turn, influence the outcome of judgment processes. Consider, first of all, an observer who anticipates interaction with the actor. Such an observer is likely to experience a pressing need to reduce uncertainty regarding the actor's subsequent actions toward him or her. This concern with prediction is considered by many to underlie the observer bias toward dispositional rather than situational attribution (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Miller & Norman, 1975). It should be noted, though, that knowledge of an actor's traits does not necessarily assure the observer that he or she will experience rewarding outcomes in a subsequent interaction; indeed, knowledge of negative traits would seem to assure the observer of quite the opposite. Thus, an expectant observer may not desire predictability per se but rather the specific prediction that only rewarding outcomes will ensue in his or her subsequent interaction with the actor. In short, the self-concern of expectant observers may be characterized as hopefulness.

It has been suggested that the motivational orientation of observers in social interaction is simply an augmentation of the concerns that are prepotent for observers who are anticipating interaction (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Miller et al., 1978). It is important to remember, however, that face-to-face interaction is characterized by reciprocal self-awareness. Each participant is simultaneously an observer and an object of observation (Mead, 1934). The state of self-awareness has been shown to have a number of behavioral, cognitive, and affective consequences (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund & Frey, 1980). Of particular relevance to the present study is research demonstrating that the self-aware person attempts to maintain a positive self-evaluation with respect to whatever standard is most salient at the time (e.g., Federoff & Harvey, 1976; Vallacher & Solodky, 1979). In most circumstances, self-evaluation is best served by self-attribution for positive outcomes and
This reasoning suggests that causal attribution has different meanings for observers, depending on their level of engagement with the actor. For an observer who expects to interact with an actor, attribution represents a means of anticipating the actor’s future behavior. In particular, a dispositional attribution implies that the actor’s behavior in their subsequent interaction will be similar to his or her observed behavior, whereas a situational attribution suggests that the actor’s subsequent behavior may be vastly different and perhaps open to the observer’s influence. For an observer engaged in interaction with an actor, meanwhile, attribution is a means of claiming or deflecting personal responsibility for the actor’s behavior so as to maintain or defend self-esteem. A dispositional attribution minimizes the observer’s role in eliciting the actor’s behavior, since it implies that the actor behaves consistently toward people generally in the observed fashion. In contrast, since the interacting observer is a prime feature of the actor’s situation, a situational attribution implies that the observer is in part responsible for the actor’s behavior. Finally, under conditions of observer–actor detachment, attribution represents a manifestation of neither hopefulness nor egotism. Presumably, if detached observers are concerned about anything at all, it is the achievement of understanding, a concern not unlike that of the basic scientist (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). In the absence of obvious self-concern, dispositional versus situational attribution may reflect the operation of covariation rules for processing information (Kelley, 1967) or of intuitive theories of events (Ajzen, 1977).

The effect of engagement level on causal attribution would seem to be most apparent when the actor behaves in a manner that suggests a positive or negative evaluation of the person with whom he or she is interacting. Consider, first of all, an actor who behaves in a positive, cordial fashion toward someone, thereby implying a positive evaluation of the person. An observer who anticipates interacting with such an actor should tend toward relatively dispositional attribution; by seeing the actor’s behavior as reflective of enduring personal qualities, the observer can look forward to similar behavior in their subsequent interaction. An interacting observer, on the other hand, may be inclined to claim personal responsibility for eliciting the actor’s implied positive evaluation and thereby experience self-esteem enhancement. Since the interacting observer is a key element in the actor’s situation, this egotistic tendency is promoted by relatively situational attribution. By way of comparison, a detached observer’s causal attribution for an actor’s positive behavior should be neither as dispositional as that of an expectant observer nor as situational as that of an interacting observer.

The attributional effects of engagement level should be markedly different when the actor behaves in a manner that suggests negative evaluation of the person with whom the actor is interacting. In this case, the expectant observer should be inclined toward relatively situational attribution, feeling perhaps that he or she, as part of the actor’s subsequent situation, can cause the actor to behave in a rewarding manner during their interaction. The interacting observer, meanwhile, should demonstrate relatively dispositional attribution for negative behavior; such an attribution serves to protect the observer’s self-esteem, since it implies that the actor’s negative feelings were not provoked by the observer but were instead a reflection of the actor’s personality (“He would dislike anyone”). And finally, since neither the observed nor the future behavior of the negative actor has any obvious hedonic relevance for the detached observer, a causal attribution made under conditions of detachment should be neither as situational as that made when anticipating interaction nor as dispositional as that made when actually interacting with the actor.

In addition to its effect on causal attribution, observer–actor engagement level may also promote differential actor evaluation. Consider first an actor whose behavior suggests that he or she is favorably impressed with his or her interaction partner. Such
behavior is likely to be pleasing for both an expectant and an interacting observer; the former can look forward to a rewarding interaction with the actor, whereas the latter is actually experiencing rewarding outcomes provided by the actor. For a detached observer, however, the actor’s behavior, though positive, is not hedonically relevant. Thus, compared to detached observers, both expectant and interacting observers should indicate higher liking for a positive actor and perhaps rate him or her more positively on trait dimensions as well. A difference in actor evaluation between expectant and interacting observers seems likely, however, when the actor’s behavior implies disliking for his or her interaction partner. Expectant observers, hopeful that their subsequent interaction with the actor will be pleasant, may be inclined to perceive the actor in a favorable light, despite the negative tone of his or her behavior. Indeed, there is evidence that anticipated interaction does promote heightened attraction for an actor, even if the actor’s behavior is negative (e.g., Tyler & Sears, 1977). Egotism on the part of interacting observers, on the other hand, should promote relatively negative evaluation of an actor who behaves in a manner that threatens their self-esteem. Finally, since neither hopefulness nor egotism are prepotent for detached observers, their evaluation of a negative actor should be less positive than expectant observers’ and less negative than interacting observers’ evaluations. Again, the effect of engagement level on evaluation should be apparent both in overall attraction and in specific trait judgments.

Method

Overview

The experimental design was a 3 (engagement level) × 2 (actor affect) between-subjects factorial. Under the guise of evaluating job interview formats, subjects asked experimenter-provided questions of a male confederate interviewee via a video hook-up. The confederate’s substantive responses to all questions were prerecorded and identical for all conditions. Engagement level was manipulated by leading subjects to believe either that (a) they were simply viewing a prerecorded tape (detached), (b) they were viewing a tape but would subsequently conduct a live interview with the same person (anticipated interaction), or (c) they were presently conducting a live interview with the person (actual interaction). The actor affect manipulation consisted of a brief preface (also prerecorded) to each response, in which the interviewee intimated that the question was of high quality (positive actor affect) or of low quality (negative actor affect). Subjects’ assessed judgments of the interviewee included causal attribution, attraction, and trait ratings.

Participants

Forty-two male and 18 female undergraduates participated in exchange for credits in their psychology courses. Subjects were run individually and assigned randomly to conditions with the constraint that within conditions, males and females were to be represented in proportion to their respective total m. The experimental confederate was a male psychology graduate student in his early twenties. Two male experimenters were randomly assigned to subjects and conditions.

Procedure

The alleged purpose of the study was to evaluate various job interview formats in terms of how well they allowed an interviewer to gain insight into an interviewee’s personality. The subject was to act as an interviewer and ask questions from one of the interview formats; he or she would see and hear the interviewee respond to the questions over a TV monitor. The interviewee was said to be applying for a position as a summer camp counselor. At this point, the subject’s belief about his or her engagement with the interviewee was manipulated (see Independent Variables section). The experimenter then escorted the subject to the interviewee’s room, which was immediately adjacent. As is apparent in Figure 1, the two rooms had a parallel arrangement: Each contained a microphone, a video camera, a 23-in. (58.42 cm) TV monitor, a signal light, and a table and chair. The subject thus learned how the interviewer and interviewee were able to communicate visually and vocally during the interview.

After escorting the subject back to his or her room, the experimenter explained that because the timing of questions and answers was a very important variable to control for in studies of this type, the questions and answers had to be initiated according to a prearranged system rather than left to the discretion of interviewers and interviewees. In this arrangement, the subject was to ask each interview question when his or her signal light was activated by means of a remote control switch controlled by the experimenter. In a like manner, the interviewee allegedly had been instructed to deliver his responses only on cue from his signal light. Thus, noticeably long latencies between question completion and response initiation, which would occur for subjects with rapid speech, were not expected to arouse suspicion. (Concerns about suspicion applied mainly to subjects in the actual interaction condition, described below.) The subject was then provided with six 5 in. × 8 in. index cards, with a different question typed on each. He or she was asked to read aloud the questions in order to become familiar with them prior to the interview. The first question simply asked for the interviewee’s name and major field of study; the others asked about his
qualifications and past experience, his motivation to seek the job, his self-assessment of personal qualities that would represent assets in the job, his capacity for dealing with job-induced cynicism, and finally, his strategy for dealing with a hypothetical incident (a suicide attempt by a recently blinded child). During the interview, the subject was to ask a given question when signaled to do so and then to place that question card on the bottom of the stack and wait for the signal to ask the next question.

After answering any questions about the procedure, the experimenter announced that the interview would proceed, switched on the TV monitor, and by means of a remote control switch, unobtrusively activated an unseen videotape machine located outside of the two rooms (see Figure 1). Once the tape began, an image of the interviewee's head and shoulders appeared on the subject's monitor, and the experimenter signaled the subject to ask the first question. During this question and all subsequent questions, the interviewee appeared to be gazing attentively at the interviewer on his own monitor; that is, on the subject's monitor, the interviewee's head was pivoted 45° to his own left (see Figure 1). This pose was maintained for an interval of time that ended when the experimenter allegedly signaled him to respond to the question. To deliver his response to each question, the interviewee pivoted his head to face the TV camera; thus, his face was in frontal view on the subject's monitor while he spoke. The interviewee's responses to all questions were from a well-rehearsed script that was intended to convey an image of an individual who was qualified, sensible, and sensitive, though by no means flawless (e.g., in responding to the hypothetical suicide question, he appeared somewhat indecisive and gave a rather obvious reply). After the interviewee's last response, the experimenter switched off the TV monitor and unobtrusively deactivated the tape machine. The subject was then asked to complete a questionnaire from which the dependent measures were derived. Finally, the subject was probed for suspicion, debriefed, sworn to secrecy, and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Observer–actor engagement. Subjects in the detachment condition were informed that they would be watching a videotape of the interviewee, and thus they knew that they would not be eliciting his responses. They were told, however, that role playing the part of the interviewer would make them feel more involved than simply observing the interview as a third party and, moreover, might allow them to gain better insight into the interviewee's personality. The TV camera, located to the right of the subject (see Figure 1), was focused away from the subject at all times.

Subjects in the anticipated interaction condition also were informed that they would be simply observing a videotape of the interviewee, but they were led to believe that subsequent to the videotaped interview, they would conduct a live interview with the same person regarding a different job. They were told that role playing the part
of the interviewer who actually conducted the interview would familiarize them with the procedure and basic question format to be employed in the live interview and might allow them to gain insight into the interviewee's personality in advance of their actual interaction. As the experimenter began to explain the interview procedure, the confederate knocked on the door and introduced himself as the interviewee. The experimenter told him that he was a little early and asked him to return in 20 minutes. This exchange was intended to reinforce the subjects' belief that they would subsequently conduct a live interview. The TV camera was focused away from the subject at all times.

In the actual interaction condition, subjects were led to believe that they would be conducting a live interview by means of a video hook-up between themselves and the interviewee, who would be in the adjacent room. As in the anticipated interaction condition, the confederate knocked on the door and introduced himself as the interviewee. The experimenter told him that he was early and that he would be escorted to the adjacent room when the interview was ready to begin. The purpose of this exchange was to reinforce the subjects' belief that they would be conducting a live interview. (The confederate was dressed from the waist up identically to the way he had dressed when the videotape was created.)

After explaining the interview procedure, the experimenter excused himself while he retrieved the confederate. He returned a minute later, escorted the confederate through the subject's room, and briefly described the interview procedure for the confederate. The subject could overhear the experimenter's description, since the doors to both rooms were open at this point and the experimenter was standing in the doorway to the interviewee's room. The experimenter then returned to the subject's room, activated the TV camera, and focused it on the subject (see Figure 1), presumably so that the interviewee could observe the subject on his monitor. He then tested the audio connection between the two rooms by asking the confederate over the subject's microphone, "Can you hear me in your room?" The confederate answered affirmatively via his microphone, which was connected to the audio output of the subject's monitor. After this exchange, the confederate disconnected his microphone to prevent spurious noises from being broadcast during the videotape playback. The experimenter then activated the tape machine and the monitor.

Actor affect. Subjects observed one of two videotapes, which differed primarily in the affective tone displayed by the interviewee toward the interviewer. Both tapes had exactly the same answers for the first two questions (name and major, prior experience and qualifications) and only slightly different answers for the other four. On the positive actor tape, the interviewee prefaced his responses to these questions with a comment suggesting that he approved of the question (e.g., "That's a good question,") "Hmm, interesting question—let me think a moment"). On the negative actor tape, his preface suggested mild disapproval of the question (e.g., "That's not a very good question," "That question doesn't exactly require a great deal of thought").1 Aside from these preface differences, the tapes were identical in the interviewee's responses to each question and in his vocal inflections and facial expressions. The positive tape lasted 305 sec, the negative tape, 300 sec.

Dependent Measures

On the postinterview questionnaire, subjects indicated their impression of the interviewee's personality by rating him on nine 9-point bipolar trait scales representing three broad dimensions of evaluation (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972): social good–bad (sociable–unsociable, good-natured–irritable, humorous–humorless); intellectual good–bad (intelligent– unintelligent, wavering–persistent, foolish–scientific); and general evaluation (honest–dishonest, finicky–tolerant, artistic–imaginative). The average of each three-item set was considered a separate dependent measure. Subjects also indicated whether they thought the interviewee's behavior was a reflection of the situation (i.e., factors in the interview setting) or of his personality; a 9-point scale was provided for this judgment (1 = situation, 9 = personality). Subjects made three other judgments regarding the interviewee: how much they liked him, how much he liked the interviewer (the subject, in the actual interaction condition), and how much he liked the questions he was asked. For each judgment, a 9-point scale was provided, with high numbers indicating high liking.2

Results

Preliminary Analyses3

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed for the set of eight dependent measures, with observer–actor engagement and actor affect as the independent variables. Results demonstrated significant effects for engagement, $F(16, 96) = 4.50, p < .0001$; affect, $F(8, 47) = 19.64, p < .0001$;

1 When familiarizing subjects with the questions, the experimenter had casually remarked, "These seem like pretty good questions, don't they?" This remark, which invariably elicited a confirmation, was intended to induce a positive attitude toward, and commitment to, the questions on the part of subjects.

2 Subjects also responded to five open-ended questions that assessed their recall of specific information provided by the interviewee. Interrater reliability in scoring these responses for completeness and accuracy was quite high, and a measure of total recall was included in the multivariate analysis of variance described below. However, since the present analysis has not invoked information recall as a mediational factor, and because the obtained recall effects are not readily interpretable, these data are not discussed further in the present article. Information about the recall data are available upon request from the first author, Department of Graduate Psychology, Oglesby Hall, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506.

3 Separate analyses of variance were performed to examine the effects of experimenter and sex of subject on each dependent measure. None of the obtained effects was significant ($p > .10$ in all cases), and data were therefore collapsed across both factors in subsequent analyses.
and the Engagement × Affect interaction, $F(16, 94) = 3.01, p < .0004$. A separate $3 \times 2$ (Engagement × Affect) univariate analysis of variance was then performed for each of the dependent measures. The results of these analyses are reported below.

The data indicated that the actor affect manipulation was successful. The negative interviewee was seen as liking the questions less ($M = 2.33$; below the midpoint of the scale) than was the positive interviewee ($M = 6.1$; above the midpoint), $F(1, 54) = 132.6, p < .0001$. The negative interviewee was also seen as liking the interviewer less ($M = 4.2$; below the midpoint) than was the positive interviewee ($M = 5.7$; above the midpoint), $F(1, 54) = 39.4, p < .0001$. There was also a significant effect for engagement, $F(2, 54) = 4.23, p < .05$. Greater liking for the interviewer was inferred in the actual interaction condition ($M = 5.3$) than in either the anticipated interaction condition ($M = 4.4$), $t(38) = 2.32, p < .05$, or the detachment condition ($M = 4.1$), $t(38) = 2.21, p < .05$; the latter two conditions did not differ significantly from each other ($t < 1$).

**Attribution**

Analysis of the attribution item demonstrated a significant main effect for engagement, $F(2, 54) = 6.46, p < .01$, and a significant two-way interaction, $F(2, 54) = 15.54, p < .0001$. Planned comparisons of the means underlying the interaction (see Table 1) provided support for the hypotheses. For the positive actor, causal attribution was significantly more dispositional in the anticipated interaction condition than in the actual interaction condition; mean causal attribution in the detachment condition fell between the anticipated and actual interaction condition means and was significantly different from both. For the negative actor, meanwhile, attribution was significantly more dispositional in the actual interaction condition than in the anticipated interaction condition; causal attribution in the detachment condition was more dispositional than that in the anticipated interaction condition but did not differ from that in the actual interaction condition.

**Attraction**

Analysis of the attraction item demonstrated significant effects for affect, $F(1, 54) = 34.39, p < .0001$, and engagement, $F(2, 54) = 13.16, p < .0001$. The former effect shows that the positive actor was liked more ($M = 6.1$) than was the negative actor ($M = 4.13$). With regard to engagement, planned comparisons revealed that there was less liking (greater neutrality) in the detachment condition ($M = 3.95$) than in the anticipated interaction condition ($M = 6.0$), $t(38) = 3.66, p < .001$, and actual interaction conditions ($M = 5.4$), $t(38) = 2.72, p < .01$. The latter two conditions did not differ significantly from each other, $t(38) = 1.3, ns$. The attraction means are displayed in Table 2.

**Trait Judgments**

Analyses of the trait dimensions demonstrated two significant effects. First, there was a main effect for actor affect on the social good–bad dimension, $F(1, 54) = 11.76, p < .0001$, such that the positive actor was seen as more pleasant socially ($M = 6.4$) than was the negative actor ($M = 5.13$). Second, there was an Engagement × Affect interaction.

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### Table 1: Mean Causal Attribution as a Function of Observer–Actor Engagement and Actor Affect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor affect</th>
<th>Detachment</th>
<th>Anticipated interaction</th>
<th>Actual interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Scores could range from 1 (situation attribution) to 9 (dispositional attribution). $n = 10$ per cell. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$.

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### Table 2: Mean Liking for the Actor as a Function of Observer–Actor Engagement and Actor Affect

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Anticipated interaction</th>
<th>Actual interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Scores could range from 1 (low liking) to 9 (high liking). $n = 10$ per cell. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$. 

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teraction on the intellectual good–bad dimension, \( F(2, 54) = 3.25, p < .05 \). In the actual interaction condition, the negative actor was judged as more intelligent \( (M = 7.3) \) than was the positive actor \( (M = 5.83) \), \( t(18) = 2.17, p < .05 \); no other comparisons were significant (see Table 3). Apparently, the negative interviewee's critical attitude toward the interviewer's questions was seen not only as unsociable but also as indicative of intelligence-related qualities.

**Correlational Analyses**

Correlation analyses were performed to determine if the dependent measures were related to one another at the level of individual subjects. Results demonstrated that attraction was independent of causal attribution, \( r(58) = .16, p < .10 \), but positively correlated with all three trait dimensions: \( rs(58) = .47 \) \((p < .001)\), .26 \((p < .02)\), and .46 \((p < .001)\), respectively, for social, intellectual, and general evaluation. None of the trait dimensions was significantly correlated with attribution \((p > .10 \text{ in all cases})\).

**Discussion**

The results of this study offer interesting insights into person perception in social contexts. The findings regarding attribution, first of all, conformed to our hypotheses and are therefore compatible with the notion that different concerns are prepotent when anticipating a social encounter than when actually experiencing one. Expectant observers, motivated by a hope that their subsequent interaction would be pleasant, tended to discount the negative actor's behavior as situationally caused but saw the positive actor's behavior as dispositional and thus likely to be repeated. Interacting observers, meanwhile, showed a contrasting attributional pattern. Instead of demonstrating helpfulness, a motive that by definition is limited to anticipation, these observers gave evidence of egotism. Specifically, because the actor's behavior was directed at them, they demonstrated self-defense when it was negative (attribution to the actor's personality) and self-enhancement when it was positive (attribution to the actor's situation and, by implication, to themselves). Finally, detached observers did not experience the press of hedonic concerns and thus did not make differential attributions for the behavior of the positive versus the negative actor.

Attraction and trait inference, however, demonstrated effects that were only partially supportive of the hypotheses. These measures, moreover, were uncorrelated with attribution. Yet, the correlations between attraction and the three trait dimensions were all significant, and attraction and social good–bad showed similar effects as a function of actor affect. Thus, regardless of the level of observer–actor engagement, the positive actor was liked more than was the negative actor and was rated more positively on social traits. These findings suggest that attraction and trait inference represent judgment tasks that are phenomenologically distinct from causal attribution. It seems that observers, regardless of their degree of involvement with an actor, simply assign trait values that describe the actor's behavior and do so without concern for whether the behavior stems from dispositional or situational causes. An actor's friendly behavior, for instance, is labeled as sociable and good-

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td>5.83&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>5.70&lt;sub&gt;a,b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>6.43&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>7.30&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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*Note. Scores could range from 1 (low rating) to 9 (high rating). \( n = 10 \) per cell. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at \( p < .05 \).*

4. To test whether dispositional attribution was associated with relatively extreme trait inferences (Jones & Davis, 1965), a measure of response polarity was first derived for each trait dimension and then correlated with the attribution measure. Specifically, the absolute value of the difference between a subject's rating on a trait scale and the scale's midpoint was calculated for each rating scale; the absolute value across the three rating scales constituting a dimension was defined as the dimension's response polarity. None of the resultant polarity scores was correlated with attribution \((p > .10 \text{ in all cases})\).
natured rather than as unsociable and irritable. Attraction, in turn, represents observers' immediate affective reaction to the actor's behavior; a pleasant person is more likable than an unpleasant person. Causal attribution, on the other hand, does not bear an obvious correspondent relation to pleasant versus unpleasant behavior but rather is a highly inferential process and, thus, open to the mediating influence of engagement-related concerns.

Our predictions regarding actual interaction were based on the notion that self-awareness is inherent in this level of engagement and that the self-aware state tends to promote egotism. One could question, though, whether the self-awareness construct is essential to the egotism analysis; the hedonic relevance and personalism (Jones & Davis, 1965) of affective reactions to oneself in face-to-face interaction would alone seem sufficient to make egotism salient. It should be noted, moreover, that self-awareness has been credited with effects other than self-evaluation concern. One such effect relevant to the present study is the tendency for self-attention to polarize affective reactions to emotion-producing stimuli (Scheier & Carver, 1977). This effect was not evident in the present study, however, since attraction in the actual interaction condition was no more polarized than attraction in the expected interaction or detachment conditions. Thus, although self-awareness is certainly an important feature of face-to-face interaction (e.g., Fenigstein, 1979; Mead, 1934), further research is necessary to delineate precisely the role, if any, that self-awareness per se plays in shaping judgments at this level of engagement.

We have argued that variations in the level of observer-actor engagement affect the outcome of judgment processes by making different manifestations of self-concern salient for observers. From a somewhat different perspective, however, it can be suggested that each level of engagement in the present study effectively created a different context for ascribing meaning to the actor's behavior and that these variations in meaning were responsible for the obtained effects. Even the simplest action, after all, can be construed in many different ways (Val-
concern framework. Simply put, the engagement level variations of the present study may have generated different interpretive sets for observers by virtue of making different concerns prepotent for them. Thus, expectant observers, for whom the reward-tingness of the subsequent interaction was a prime concern, may have viewed the actor’s behavior in terms of its probable consistency over time. Interacting observers, meanwhile, may have been especially sensitive to the personalistic aspects of the actor’s behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965) and interpreted the actor’s comments and expressions in terms of their self-esteem-enhancing versus threatening connotations. In short, different manifestations of self-concern and variations in behavior interpretation may be meaningfully related to one another, and both may reflect the level of observer–actor engagement. Future research would do well to provide fine-grained analyses of the attentional and processing mechanisms that mediate the effect of observer self-concern in ascribing meaning to behavior.

Reference Note


References


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