5 · The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior

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When a student who is doing poorly in school discusses his problem with a faculty adviser, there is often a fundamental difference of opinion between the two. The student, in attempting to understand and explain his inadequate performance, is usually able to point to environmental obstacles such as a particularly onerous course load, to temporary emotional stress such as worry about his draft status, or to a transitory confusion about life goals that is now resolved. The faculty adviser may nod and may wish to believe, but in his heart of hearts he usually disagrees. The adviser is convinced that the poor performance is due neither to the student's environment nor to transient emotional states. He believes instead that the failure is due to enduring qualities of the student—to lack of ability, to irremediable laziness, to neurotic ineptitude.

When Kitty Genovese was murdered in view of thirty-nine witnesses in Queens, social scientists, the press, and the public marveled at the apathy of the residents of New York and, by extension, of urban America. Yet it seems unlikely that the witnesses themselves felt that their failure to intercede on the woman's behalf was due to apathy. At any rate, interviewers were unable to elicit comments from the witnesses on the order of "I really didn't care if she lived or died." Instead, the eyewitnesses reported that they had been upset, but felt that there was nothing they could or needed to do about a situation that in any case was ambiguous to them.

In their autobiographies, former political leaders often report a different perspective on their past acts from that commonly held by the public. Acts perceived by the public to have been wise, planful, courageous, and imaginative on the one hand, or unwise, haphazard, cowardly, or pedestrian on the other, are often seen in quite a different light by the autobiographer. He is likely to emphasize

the situational constraints at the time of the action—the role limitations, the conflicting pressures brought to bear, the alternative paths of action that were never open or that were momentarily closed—and to perceive his actions as having been inevitable. "Wise moves" and "blunders" alike are often viewed by the leader as largely inescapable under the circumstances. The public is more inclined to personalize causation for success and failure. There are good leaders who can cope with what the situation brings and bad leaders who cannot.

In each of these instances, the actor's perceptions of the causes of his behavior are at variance with those held by outside observers. The actor's view of his behavior emphasizes the role of environmental conditions at the moment of action. The observer's view emphasizes the causal role of stable dispositional properties of the actor. We wish to argue that *there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions.* This tendency often stems in part from the actor's need to justify blameworthy action, but may also reflect a variety of other factors having nothing to do with the maintenance of self-esteem. We shall emphasize these other, more cognitive factors but include also a consideration of the role of self-justification.

The proposition that actors attribute their behavior to situational constraints while observers attribute the behavior to dispositions of the actor is best characterized, perhaps, as an actuarial proposition. We acknowledge at the outset that there are undoubtedly many exceptions. In our opinion, though, there are good theoretical reasons for believing that the proposition is generally correct. We wish to explore what we believe to be powerful cognitive forces impelling actors to attribute their behavior to the environment and observers to attribute that same behavior to characteristics of the actor. The proposition has not been fully tested, but there are a few experiments that provide data consistent with it. We will now describe these experiments in order to supplement our selected anecdotes.

Experimental Evidence Consistent with the Proposition

Jones, Rock, Shaver, Goethals, and Ward [1968] compared the attributions made by actor-subjects with those made by observer-subjects in a rigged IQ testing situation. To collect their observer data, Jones et al. asked each subject and an accomplice to take an IQ test "designed to discriminate at the very highest levels of intelligence." The items were quite difficult and some were insoluble. Success and failure feedback for both the accomplice and the subject was reported after each item. The items were ambiguous enough to permit feedback that bore no necessary relation to the performance of the subject. The pattern of "successes" was such that at the end of the series the subject believed he had solved ten of the thirty items, with success scattered randomly throughout the test. In one of the experimental conditions, it was made to appear that the accomplice had solved fifteen randomly scattered problems. In another condition, it was also made to appear that the accomplice solved fifteen problems, but many more of the initial problems were solved than final problems. In a third condition, the accomplice again solved fifteen problems, but he had many more successes at the end than at the beginning. Special pains were taken to assure the subjects that the items were of equal difficulty, and the evidence suggests these assurances were accepted.

Whether the accomplice solved more problems at the beginning of the series (descending condition) or at the end (ascending condition) had a pronounced influence on (*a*) the subject's recall of the accomplice's performance, (*b*) the subject's prediction about the number of problems the accomplice would solve on a later, similar series, and (*c*) the subject's estimate of the accomplice's intelligence. If the accomplice solved a great many problems at the beginning of the series, the subject perceived him as more intelligent, distorted his overall performance on the test in a more favorable direction, and predicted that he would do better on the later series than if the accomplice solved few problems at the beginning. For most of the measures, in most of the variations of the experiment reported by Jones et al., the randomly successful accomplice was judged to be intermediate between the descending and ascending accomplices.

Jones et al. interpreted their data as evidence of a strong primacy effect in the attribution of ability: early information was weighted heavily and later evidence was essentially ignored [see Jones & Goethals 1971]. For our purposes, the important point is that ability attributions were made at all. This fact serves as the background against which to evaluate the results of a variation in which the tables were turned and the accomplice randomly solved the ten problems while the subject solved fifteen problems, either in random order, in descending order, or in ascending order.

When the feedback patterns were thus reassigned, the results were markedly different. In the descending and ascending conditions it was apparently impossible for the subjects to resist the conclusion, despite the experimenter's initial disclaimer, that the item difficulty had changed over the series. Descending subjects believed that the items got more difficult and ascending subjects believed they got less difficult. These beliefs apparently affected subjects' expectations about their performance on a future series. Ascending subjects predicted they would do better on the later series than did descending subjects, completely reversing the direction of observers' predictions. As would be expected, subjects' judgments about their own intellectual ability were unaffected by the experimental manipulations.

The pattern of attributions is therefore quite different for actor and observer. In identical situations, the actor attributes performance to variations in task difficulty, the observer to variations in ability.

The experiments by Jones et al. present data for actors and observers in identical situations. Another set of experiments, while lacking data on actors themselves, indicates that observers are remarkably inclined to see behavior in dispositional terms. Three experiments were conducted by Jones and Harris [1967]. In the first of these they asked their college student subjects to read essays or listen to speeches presumably written by fellow students. Subjects were asked to give their estimates of the communicator's real opinions. They were told either that the communicator had been assigned one side of the issue or that he had been completely free to choose a side. It is the "no choice" conditions that are of most interest to us here. In one case the impression of no choice was created by telling subjects they were reading essays written for a political science course in which the instructor had required the students to write, for example, a "short cogent defense of Castro's Cuba." In another experiment subjects believed they were reading the opening statement by a college debater whose adviser had directed him to argue a specified side of the Castro topic. In a third experiment subjects believed they were hearing a tape recording of a subject in a psychology experiment who had been instructed to give a speech favoring or opposing segregation. Questionnaire responses showed that subjects easily distinguished between choice and no choice conditions in the degree of choice available to the communicator.

Despite the fact that the subjects seem to have clearly perceived the heavy constraints on the communicator in the no choice conditions, their estimates of the true opinions of the communicator were markedly affected by the particular position espoused. When subjects read an essay or speech supporting Castro's Cuba, they inferred that the communicator was pro-Castro. If the communication opposed Castro's Cuba, they inferred that the communicator was anti-Castro. Across the three experiments, the effect of taking a pro versus anti stand was a highly significant determinant of attributed attitude in no choice conditions, though the effect of position taken was roughly twice as great when the communicator had complete choice.

These results are extremely interesting if they may be taken as evidence that observers attach insufficient weight to the situational determinants of behavior and attribute it, on slim evidence, to a disposition of the actor. It may be, however, that something about the content of the speeches caused the subjects to infer that the communicator actually held the opinion he was advocating. If the communications were quite eloquent and drew on esoteric sources of knowledge, it would not be surprising to learn that observers inferred that the communicator held the opinion he was delivering. This does not seem to be the proper explanation of the results, however, in view of the following facts: (*a*) the communications were designed to be "neither polished nor crude;" "of a C+ quality" in the case of the political science essay; (*b*) in each experiment it was made clear that subjects had access to study materials to help them formulate their arguments; (*c*) in a later series of experiments, Snyder (unpublished data) found that when the communications used were the actual products of students under no choice conditions, the same effects found by Jones and Harris were obtained. A crucial feature of Snyder's experiments was that each subject wrote a no choice essay himself, to be delivered to another subject. Thus the subjects should have been clearly aware of the constraints involved and of the ease or difficulty of generating arguments for a position opposite to that privately held.

The Jones and Harris experiment provides evidence, then, that observers are willing to take behavior more or less at "face value," as reflecting a stable disposition, even when it is made clear that the actor's behavior is under severe external constraints. These results have been replicated both by Snyder and more recently by Jones, Worchel, Goethals, and Grumet [1971] with "legalization of marijuana" as the issue.

A second study providing data for observers only has been performed by McArthur [1970]. Her study is quite relevant to our proposition if one is willing to lean heavily on intuitions about the causal attributions that would be expected of actors. Subjects were given a simple, one-sentence description of an action, such as "George translates the sentence incorrectly,"

"While dancing, Ralph trips over Jane's feet," "Steve puts a bumper sticker advocating improved automobile safety on his car." They were then asked why this action probably occurred: Whether it was something about the *person* that caused him to act this way ("Something about *George* probably caused him to translate the sentence incorrectly"), or something about the *stimulus* ("Something about the *sentence* probably caused George to translate it incorrectly"), or something about the *situation* ("Something about the *particular circumstances* probably caused George to translate it incorrectly"). If subjects found none of these simple explanations to be the likely one, they were allowed to give whatever explanation they thought necessary to account for the behavior. These were then coded into complex explanations involving both person and stimulus, both person and circumstances, both stimulus and circumstances, or all three. (As it happened, only the person-stimulus combination was resorted to with very great frequency.)

It seems likely that if one were to ask a random sample of people who had mistranslated sentences, tripped over feet, or placed bumper stickers on their cars why they had performed their various actions, a rather high fraction of explanations would be pure stimulus attributions or mixed stimulus-circumstance attributions. We would expect answers such as "That sentence was difficult to translate," "It was dark and Jane doesn't cha-cha the way I do," "The AAA sent me this catchy bumper sticker in the mail." For McArthur's vicarious observers, however, such reasons were extremely infrequent, amounting to only 4 per cent of the total attributions. By far the greatest proportion of reasons given—44 per cent for each of these particular actions—were pure *person* attributions: George translates the sentence incorrectly because he is rather poor at translating sentences and Steve is the sort who puts bumper stickers on his car.

McArthur also presented her subjects with statements about emotional experiences, such as "John laughs at the comedian," "Sue is afraid of the dog," "Tom is enthralled by the painting." One would expect that in a random sample of people found laughing at comedians, being frightened by dogs, or being enthralled by paintings, most of the actors would explain their experiences in pure stimulus terms: The comedian is funny; the dog is scary; the painting is beautiful. For McArthur's observers, however, only 19 per cent of the attributions were pure stimulus attributions and the most frequent attributions (45 per cent of the total) were *person-stimulus interactions:* "Sue tends to be afraid of dogs and this is a very large one." Interestingly, one of the emotion items did produce a very high proportion (52 per cent) of pure stimulus attributions: "Mary is angered by the psychology experiment." Since subjects were at that moment participating in a psychology experiment, it is tempting to conclude that they were responding as actors rather than as observers.

It is possible that some unintended feature of McArthur's highly artificial situation forced attributions away from the stimulus and toward the person. Perhaps a different sample of statements or a more extended account of the behavior would yield different results. Nevertheless, the willingness of her subjects to invoke explanations involving dispositions of the person seems striking. One's strong intuition is that the actors themselves in real-life situations of the type described to McArthur's subjects would rarely interpret their behavior in dispositional terms.

McArthur [1970] completed a second experiment that is less open to criticism on methodological grounds. Subjects were induced to perform a particular act and a written account of the actor and the surrounding circumstances was presented to observers. It was then possible to compare the attributions made by the actor subjects with the later attributions made by observer subjects. McArthur obtained the consent of subjects to participate in a survey concerning interpersonal relationships and then asked the subjects why they had agreed to participate. As we would expect, subjects were inclined to attribute their participation to the importance of the survey and were not likely to attribute their participation to a general disposition to take part in such surveys. Observers exactly reversed this pattern, attributing subjects' participation primarily to a personal inclination to take part in surveys and only secondarily to the value of the survey.

McArthur's study comes very close to being a direct test of the proposition that actors attribute cause to situations while observers attribute cause to dispositions. It suffers, however, from the interpretive difficulty that information about the actor's behavior was given to observers only in printed, verbal form. Two studies by Nisbett and his colleagues avoided this problem by examining situations where more nearly equivalent forms of information were available to actors and observers.

In the first of these studies, Nisbett and Caputo [1971] asked college students to write a brief paragraph stating why they had chosen their major field of concentration and why they liked the girl they dated most frequently. Subjects were asked to write similar brief paragraphs explaining why their best friends had chosen their majors and girl friends. It proved possible to code all of the answers, à la McArthur, into either stimulus attributions ("Chemistry is a high-paying field," "She's a very warm person") or person attributions ("I want to make a lot of

money," "I like warm girls"). When answering for himself, the average subject listed roughly the same number of stimulus and person reasons for choosing his major and twice as many stimulus as person reasons for choosing his girl friend. When answering for his best friend, subjects listed approximately three times as many person as stimulus reasons for choosing the major and roughly the same number of stimulus as person reasons for choosing the girl friend. Thus, when describing either choice of a major or choice of a girl friend, subjects were more likely to use dispositional language for their best friends than for themselves.

In a final study, Nisbett, Legant, and Marecek [1971] allowed observer subjects to watch actor subjects in a controlled laboratory setting. Subjects were Yale coeds. Those designated as actors believed they were to participate in a study on decision making. Subjects designated as observers believed their task would be to watch the subject make decisions and then make judgments about the subject's reasons for making her decisions. Prior to the fictitious decision-making study, the experimenter met with the actor and two confederates who presumably also were going to be subjects in the decision-making study. The observer sat in the background, with instructions simply to observe the (real) target subject. The experimenter, after some introductions and throat-clearing, said, "Before we begin the study, I happen to have sort of a real decision for you to make." The experimenter explained that the "Human Development Institute" at Yale would be sponsoring a weekend for the corporate board and some of their prospective financial backers. The wives of these men would need entertainment and campus tours for the weekend. As a consequence, the Institute had asked the psychology department to recruit students to help with this chore. After elaborating on details of time, place, and specific activities, the experimenter solicited the help of the two confederates and the actor. The confederates were always asked first, and, in order to boost compliance rates on the part of actors, always willingly volunteered.

The amount of money offered to volunteers was manipulated—either $.50 per hour or $1.50 per hour—with very large effects on compliance rates. Only about a fifth of the low-payment actors volunteered, while two-thirds of the high-payment actors volunteered. Volunteers' rates were thus determined in a major way by a purely extrinsic factor: the amount of money offered for compliance.

Actor and observer were then led to separate rooms where they were asked detailed questions concerning the actor's reasons for volunteering or not volunteering. The questions included an item designed to tap the extent to which the actor's behavior was considered an expression of a general disposition to volunteer or not volunteer for worthy activities: "How likely do you think it is that you (or the subject) would also volunteer to canvass for the United Fund?" Observers of volunteering actors thought that the actors would be more likely to volunteer for the United Fund than observers of nonvolunteering actors. Actors themselves did not think they were any more likely to help the United Fund if they were volunteers than if they were nonvolunteers. Thus, in this experimental situation, observers infer dispositions from observation of the actor's behavior, while actors themselves do not.

This last experiment is useful in pointing out the relationship between our proposition and the proposal by Bem [1965, 1967] emphasizing the *convergent* perceptions of actors and observers. In all important respects, according to Bem, people use the same kinds of evidence and follow the same logic whether they are making self-attributions or deciding about the characteristics of others. Actors are self-observers, viewing their own behavior in terms of the surrounding context and inferring what their attitudes and feelings must have been. We agree that actors often reflect on their own actions to check on the direction and intensity of their attitudes and feelings, but contend that actors are much more likely than observers to see those actions as constrained by the situations. We feel it is frequently the case that, as in the experiment just described, observers make dispositional inferences from behavior that is interpreted quite differently by actors. To support this contention we shall now examine what we believe to be differences in the information available to actor and observer and differences between the two in the processing of the available information.

The Information Available to Actor and Observer

It is a truism that the meaning of an action can be judged only in relation to its context. It is central to our argument that the context data are often quite different for actor and observer and that these differing data prompt differing attributions. The kinds of data available for the attribution process may be conveniently broken down into effect data and cause data. Effect data are of three broad types: data about the nature of the act itself (what was done), data about the environmental outcomes of the act (success or failure, reaction of the recipient of action, and so on), and data about the actor's experiences (pleasure, anger, embarrassment). Cause data are of two broad types: environmental causes (incen-

tives, task difficulty) and intention data (what the actor meant to do, how hard he was working to do it). This categorization is useful for pinpointing the areas where discrepancies are likely to occur in the information available to actor and observer.

Effect Data

Under the category of effect data, it seems clear that actor and observer can have equivalent information about the nature of the act and about environmental outcomes. The observer may know that the actor has delivered an insult and that the recipient is angered. The observer can, however, have no direct knowledge of the experiential accompaniments of the act for the actor. The observer's knowledge about the actor's feelings is limited to inferences of two types: attempts to read inner experience from physiognomic and gestural cues, and judgments based on the observer's knowledge of what others and he himself have felt in similar situations. The observer may infer from the actor's flushed face that he spoke in anger, or he may guess that an insult of the type delivered would probably only be spoken by someone in a great rage. Of course, expressive behavior may not be witnessed by the observer at all. If it is not, then he simply has no information on this score. If it is, his knowledge of the experience of the actor may range from superior in rare cases—a parent may know better than his child that the child is disappointed over a failure or frightened of moving to a strange city—to quite inferior or utterly wrong. In many circumstances actors are motivated to conceal their inner feelings. In others, misperceptions derive from unrecognized individual differences in expressive style. Knowledge of the actor's feeling states is therefore never direct, usually sketchy, and sometimes wrong.

Cause Data

Under the category of perceived causes, it seems clear that there can be equal or nearly equal knowledge of the proximal environmental stimuli operating on the actor. The observer, for example, may know that the recipient of the actor's insult had previously taunted the actor. In principle such knowledge can be as complete for the observer as for the actor. In practice such completeness is probably rarely approximated, if only because of the likelihood that the actor is responding to events more extended in time than those available to the observer. The particular taunt that triggered the actor's outburst may have been the straw that broke the camel's back—the latest in a series of frustrations. The observer is more likely to work instead with the data from one slice of time. Even so, the discrepancy in information about the causal role of the environment is probably rarely as great as the discrepancy in knowledge about the experiential accompaniments of the action. Nor is the discrepancy as great as it is with the second type of data concerning causality—the intentions of the actor.

Like the actor's feeling states, his intentions can never be directly known to the observer. In attempting to determine whether the insult was a spontaneous outburst produced by rage or a calculated move to embarrass and motivate the recipient, the observer may infer intentions from the actor's expressive behavior or from the "logic" of the situation. But, as with feeling states, knowledge of intentions is indirect, usually quite inferior, and highly subject to error.

Historical Data

As the previous section indicates, it is never really possible to divorce a given act from a broader temporal context. Much of the discrepancy between the perspectives of observer and actor arises from the difference between the observer's inferred history of everyman and the concrete individualized history of the actor himself. The actor has been exposed to a sequence of experiences that are to a degree unique, but the observer is constrained to work with the blunt conceptual tools of modal or normative experience.

Kelley [1967] has proposed that naive causal inference resembles the scientist's analysis of variance. The attributor possesses three different kinds of information that correspond to different causal possibilities: consensus information (do other actors behave in the same way to a given stimulus?); distinctiveness information (does the actor, and do other actors, behave in the same way to other stimuli?); and consistency information (does the actor, and do other actors, behave in the same way to the given stimulus across time and situational contexts?). The attributor then makes use of whatever information he has available in the "analysis of variance cube" formed by these three dimensions and makes the best causal inference he can. In Kelley's terms, the observer always lacks some of the distinctiveness and consistency information the actor possesses by virtue of knowing his own history. The observer may approach the actor's knowledge of these dimensions if he knows the actor well, but he cannot reach it. If the actor is unfamiliar to him, he knows nothing at all of this data set.

Because the actor knows his past, he is often diverted from making a dispositional attribution. If the actor insults someone, an observer, who may

assume that this is a typical sample of behavior, may infer that the actor is hostile. The actor, on the other hand, may believe that the sample is anything but typical. He may recall very few other instances when he insulted anyone and may believe that in most of these instances he was sharply provoked. The actor's knowledge about the variability of his previous conduct—associated, in his mind, with different situational requirements—often preempts the possibility of a dispositional attribution. We suspect that because of the differences in the availability of personal history data, actors and observers evaluate each act along a different scale of comparison. The observer is characteristically normative and nomothetic: He compares the actor with other actors and judges his attributes accordingly. The actor, on the other hand, is more inclined to use an ipsative or idiographic reference scale: This action is judged with reference to his other previous actions rather than the acts of other actors.

There is, in summary, good reason to believe that actors and observers often bring different information to bear on their inferences about the actor and his environment. Typically, the actor has more, and more precise, information than the observer about his own emotional state and his intentions. (We say "typically" rather than "obviously" because there are occasions when the actor might be defensively unaware of his own motives, motives that are readily discernible to the observer.) Moreover, in the absence of precise knowledge of the actor's history, the observer is compelled to deal with him as a modal case and to ignore his unique history and orientation.

The difference in information available to actor and observer probably plays an important role in producing differential attributions, but this is not the whole story. There are good reasons for believing that the same information is differentially processed by actors and observers.

Differences in Information Processing

While it hardly seems debatable that actors and observers operate much of the time with different background data, the contention that actors and observers differ fundamentally in the *processing* of available data is bound to be more controversial. We believe that important information-processing differences do exist for the basic reason that *different aspects of the available information are salient for actors and observers and this differential salience affects the course and outcome of the attribution process.*

The actor and the observer are both reaching for interpretations of behavior that are sufficient for their own decision-making purposes. With unlimited time, and using the kinds of probes that emphasize a full deterministic picture of an action sequence, observers can probably reach attributional conclusions very similar to those of the actor. In the heat of the interaction moment, however, the purposes of actor and observer are apt to be different enough to start the inference process along distinctive tracks. Conceptualization of this problem depends to some extent on the kind of action-observation situation we are considering. Two extreme cases are the mutual contingency interaction [Jones & Gerard 1967], where each actor observes and is affected by the other, and the asymmetrical case of passive observation, where running behavioral decisions are thrust exclusively upon the actor while the observer's only task is to record and interpret—as if from behind a one-way screen.

We shall later examine the differences between these two situations, but a very important feature is common to both: the action itself—its topography, rhythm, style, and content—is more salient to the observer than to the actor. In establishing the reasons for this we may begin with the observation that action involves perceptible movement and change (by definition) and it is always to some extent unpredictable. While the environment is stable and contextual from the observer's point of view, action is figural and dynamic. The actor, however, is less likely to focus his attention on his behavior than on the environmental cues that evoke and shape it. In part this is because the actor's receptors are poorly located for recording the nuances of his own behavior. Many response sequences are preprogrammed and prepackaged, as it were, and do not require careful monitoring. The actor need not concern himself with his response repertory until there is conflict among the demands of the environment. Even then he will resolve the conflict in terms of perceived stimulus requirements. In short, the actor need not and in some ways cannot observe his behavior very closely. Instead, his attention is directed outward, toward the environment with its constantly shifting demands and opportunities.

These attentional differences should result in differences in causal perception. The actor should perceive his behavior to be a response to environmental cues that trigger, guide, and terminate it. But for the observer the focal, commanding stimulus is the actor's behavior, and situational cues are to a degree ignored. This leaves the actor as the likely causal candidate, and the observer will account for the actor's responses in terms of attributed dispositions.

The effect of these differential attribution tend-

encies is amplified by bias from another source, the tendency to regard one's reactions to entities as based on accurate perceptions of them. Rather than humbly regarding our impressions of the world as interpretations of it, we see them as understandings or correct apprehensions of it. The nature of this bias is perhaps easiest to see with young children, where it is much more extensive and profound than for adults. Philosophers and other adults make a distinction between the properties of entities that a three-year-old child does not make. The distinction is between those properties that have an existence apart from the transaction of a human being with the object and those properties that are the result of such a transaction. Properties of the former type include the bulk, shape, mass, and motion of an object. Most philosophers and almost all scientists and laymen would agree that such properties have an existence apart from the perception of them. Philosophers since the seventeenth century have designated these as primary qualities and have distinguished them from what are called secondary qualities, including taste, odor, sound, and color, which have no existence apart from the interaction of a sense organ with the object. The layman, it is important to note, does not ordinarily distinguish between primary and secondary qualities unless corrected by a philosopher. He does, however, distinguish in principle between the primary and secondary qualities on the one hand and what may be called evaluations on the other. Evaluations include judgments such as those concerning the goodness, beauty, or propriety of an object or action. Adults realize, at least intellectually, that evaluations do not have the status of perceptions, but are only interpretations or reactions.

How is it that a three-year-old correctly learns the distinction between evaluations and primary qualities and incorrectly learns to group the secondary qualities with primary qualities instead of with evaluations? The answer seems to be that the child learns that certain of his reactions to objects meet invariably with consensual validation while others do not. Once he learns the designation "blue," his judgment that an object is blue is almost never contradicted. He eventually learns, however, that not everyone agrees with his evaluations of objects as pretty, funny, or good. In terms of Kelley's [1967] analysis of variance analogy, the child comes to learn that certain of his reactions to entities are shared by all others and that he himself has those same reactions at all times and under all circumstances. Simultaneously, he learns that there are certain other types of reactions that may or may not be shared by others and that he himself does not invariably have. Before the analysis of variance cubes begin to fill in, however, the child believes that clowns are funny in the same way that balls are round. Funniness is experienced as a property of the clown.

It seems clear that the distinction between evaluations and primary qualities is never fully made. We never quite get over our initial belief that funniness is a property of the clown and beauty is in the object. The probable reason for this is the fact that there remains a considerable degree of consensus even for our most subjective evaluations. Almost always at least some people agree with our evaluations, and sometimes almost everyone agrees with our evaluations. Phenomenologically, the distinction between evaluations and primary qualities is merely a quantitative one, just as the initial basis for learning the distinction—the degree of consensus—is quantitative. Just as we erroneously feel that secondary qualities are primary, we continue to feel that our subjective evaluations are in some sense perceptions.

This confusion between what is inherent in the object and what is a reaction elicited by it comes close to what Heider labels "egocentric attribution":

> Attribution to the object . . . means more than the dependence of *p*'s pleasure on the object. It also means that there is something enjoyable about the object. The attractiveness is a quality of the object, just as is the sweetness of a fruit or the roughness of a terrain. Consequently, *p*'s expectations, and therefore beliefs, refer not only to his own reactions to x on future occasions, but also the reactions of other people. The basic scheme is as follows: "Since my pleasure was aroused by x, x is positive, and therefore everyone will like it." An expectation of similarity between the reactions of others and the self is thus egocentrically determined" [1958, p. 158].

Our responses to immediately impinging stimuli are therefore biased in two ways: they are too salient and they are too "real." These biases should have a pronounced effect on the interpretations given by an actor and an observer to the actor's behavior. The actor will experience his behavior as proceeding naturally from the attractions, compulsions, and restraints in his environment. For the observer, it is not the stimuli impinging on the actor that are salient, but the behavior of the actor. The observer will therefore tend to see the actor's behavior as a manifestation of the actor, as an instance of a quality possessed by him. For the actor to interpret his behavior as the result of a disposition, he would have to weight the impact of the immediate environment less heavily, regard his knowledge about the environment as mere evaluations that may or may not be shared, and recognize that others might not respond as he does to this particular environment. For the observer to interpret the actor's behavior as a response to his environment, he would have to weight the vivid, sense-

impression data of the behavior itself less heavily and strain his empathic abilities to allow himself to imagine the vividness for the actor of the environmental cues he confronts. To the extent that actor and observer fail to accomplish these tasks, the actor will overattribute his behavior to the environment and the observer will overattribute the behavior to qualities of the actor.

The quotation from Heider is but one reflection of our debt to him, but we wish to demur from the tone of Heider's analysis. The term "egocentric attribution" and Heider's discussion of the concept make the process sound willful and motivated, or at best the result of self-satisfied laziness. We hold that the individual comes by "egocentric attribution" honestly for the most part. All of our evaluations would be "egocentric attributions" were it not for the fact that we occasionally learn that our evaluations are not shared. The illusion that our reactions are perceptions is sustained in part by the apparent consensus accompanying most of our reactions, a consensus that may rest as much on transmitted cultural norms as on the compelling features of objective "reality."

Another of Heider's observations is closely related to our present discussion:

> It seems that behavior . . . has such salient properties that it tends to engulf the field rather than be confined to its proper position as a local stimulus whose interpretation requires the additional data of a surrounding field—the situation in social perception [1958, p. 54].

What we have said about the observer's perspective on the actor's behavior clearly echoes Heider's idea. Again, however, we differ with Heider about the explanation for this phenomenon. Heider appears to believe that behavior engulfs the field because the observer often cannot see all the environmental stimuli operating on the actor and because the observer often has not seen that the actor displays different behavior in other circumstances. We have already seconded this opinion in the section dealing with differences in available information, but we also believe that behavior engulfs the field in part because the salient, vivid stimulus for the observer is the actor's behavior. Even when the stimuli influencing the actor's behavior are visible to the observer, he ignores them to an extent.

Our differences with Heider are clearly minor and involve primarily subtleties of emphasis. It should be noted, however, that our analyses have different starting points. We prefer to derive the notion that behavior engulfs the field from the assumption that, for the observer, behavior is figural against the ground of the situation. And we prefer to derive the concept of egocentric attribution from the assumption that the primitive belief in evaluations as perceptions is never outgrown.

It is now time to return to the distinction between passive and active observers, and to consider the implications of this distinction for our discussion. By definition the passive observer is not in a position to respond to the actor and the actor is unaware of his specific presence. The observer may be affected by the actor, but the actor cannot be affected by the observer—there is asymmetrical contingency. This is the situation of the moviegoer, the TV watcher, and the concealed observer behind a one-way screen. The passive observer may have any of a number of purposes that make him more attentive to certain kinds of information than others. As Lazarus [1966] and Aderman and Berkowitz [1970] have shown, it is possible to affect the amount of empathy shown by the observer for the actor by simple variations in observational instructions. Presumably, the more the observer is set to empathize with the actor, the more similar their attributional perspectives will be. Unless the observer has a strong empathy set, however, we would expect him to show the general observer tendency to underestimate the role of the environment, if only because of the differential salience of behavioral and situational information.

For the observer who is at the same time an actor, the tendency toward heightened salience of action should become more pronounced for several reasons. The fact that the observer is also caught up in action suggests that he will not be in a position to make leisurely appraisals of the setting and its contributions to unfolding behavior. Rather than being in a set to understand and evaluate the relative contributions of person and environment, the actor-observer will be tuned to process those cues that are particularly pertinent for his own next responses. Short-run behavior prediction is of paramount importance to the observer who is preparing his next act, and we suggest that the actor's behavior is more likely to seem pertinent for such predictions than the situational context evoking it. The acting organism probably does not operate at the peak of potential cognitive complexity, but it is likely to be attracted to convenient simplifying assumptions about the environment. One such simplifying assumption is that action implies a disposition to continue acting in the same manner and to act in such a manner in other situations as well.

A second consideration arises from the fact that the observer's presence and behavior may affect the actor's responses in ways not discerned by the observer. It is difficult for the active observer to evaluate the significance of his own presence because he is not often afforded clear comparative tests—tests that pit the stimulus contributions he generally makes

against the stimulus contributions of others. In the situation we are now considering, where the observer is also an actor, the observer is likely to exaggerate the uniqueness and emphasize the dispositional origin of the other's responses to his own actions, actions the observer assumes to be perfectly standard, unexceptional, and unprovocative.

A final feature of the mutual contingency interaction is that the surrounding environment is roughly the same for each actor-observer. Therefore, the extent to which each actor behaves differently in the same situation should cause *each* to attribute the other's actions to internal, dispositional factors. If actor A is attuned to the reality of the situation and sees himself as behaving accordingly, any variations in B's behavior will be attributed to B's idiosyncratic interpretations of that reality.

In summary, the observer and the actor are likely to take different perspectives toward the same information. For the observer, the actor's behavior is the figural stimulus against the ground of the situation. The actor's attention is focused outward toward situational cues rather than inward on his own behavior, and moreover, those situational cues are endowed with intrinsic properties that are seen to cause the actor's behavior toward them. Thus, for the observer the proximal cause of action is the actor; for the actor the proximal cause lies in the compelling qualities of the environment. Finally, the tendency for the observer to attribute action to the actor is probably increased to the extent that the observer is also an actor and to the extent that both the observing and the observed actor are tied together in a mutually contingent interaction.

The Naive Psychology of Observers and Actors

The preceding discussion is likely to raise in the reader's mind a question as to who is correct, the actor or the observer. In the typical case, is behavior really caused by the actor or elicited by the environment? Put in these simplified terms, the question is of course unanswerable. All behavior is in one sense caused or produced by the actor. Except perhaps in acts such as the patellar reflex, all action involves some form of explicit or implicit decision process suggesting volition or personal causation.

The more pertinent and answerable question concerns the extent to which a particular setting is likely to evoke the same response across many persons. According to either the logic of Kelley's [1967] analysis of variance cube or of Jones and Davis' [1965] correspondent inference theory, a situation that evokes a response common to many persons is likely to be seen as causing the behavior. Situations that evoke varied or unique responses are much less likely to be seen as causal. Obversely, when a person acts in a similar fashion on many different occasions, the act is seen to reflect a personal disposition.

It is obviously safer to talk about *phenomenal* causality than to raise any questions concerning accuracy or objective causality. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider the many occasions on which the observer appears to violate the rules set up for him by Kelley and by Jones and Davis—to make a dispositional inference when the data do not allow it. Without insisting that the actor is usually right, we can point to many instances where the observer's interpretation of behavior is simply wrong. The observer is wrong when he infers that an attitude is consistent with an essay written in response to a legitimate request. He is wrong when he thinks the nonintervening bystander is apathetic, or infers that the subject who agrees to help out for a handsome fee is a chronic volunteer. In each of these cases the observer seems to underestimate the power of the situation and to overestimate the uniqueness of the (in fact modal) response.

The Observer's View: Personality as a Trait Package

It is interesting to speculate on the possible implications of the observer's bias for the conception of personality structure held by most people in our society and indeed by most personality psychologists. At bottom this conception is an Aristotelian view of personality as a collection of traits, that is, the most general kind of dispositions. Does this conception err by overemphasizing individual differences at the trait level and slighting the impact of situational variance?

Mischel [1968] argues persuasively that such overemphasis is common. He reviews the evidence on the existence of several dimensions of behavior usually presumed to be manifestations of a trait—honesty, dependency, attitudes toward authority, rigidity or intolerance for ambiguity, persuasability, and so on. Using the restricted empirical criterion of predictability from one behavior that is presumed to reflect the trait to another such behavior, Mischel finds little evidence that traits exist anywhere but in the cognitive structure of observers. For example, in the early but very sophisticated and ambitious honesty study of Hartshorne and May [1928], children were exposed to a variety of temptations in a variety of settings, including the opportunity to cheat on a test, steal money, and lie to save face. Despite the fact that there was some reliability of behavior (for example, the correlation between cheating by copying

the answer key on one test in school and copying the answer key on another test was .70), there was very little generality of honesty across settings. It was rare for correlations across different behaviors, and especially for different behaviors across different settings, to exceed .30. This means, of course, that the improvement in predicting dishonesty in one situation by virtue of knowing about behavior in another situation is negligible. Mischel reviewed many other studies attempting to find behavioral generality across settings usually presumed to reflect a given trait. With the rather clear exception of abilities and ability-related traits, no disposition was found to be immune from the indictment of low generality.

The trait concept fares no better when it is examined in terms of attempts to predict behavior from paper and pencil trait measurements. When trait scores are obtained from questionnaire self-reports, they rarely predict with any accuracy behavior that is presumed to tap the trait dimension. Mischel facetiously proposes that the term "personality coefficient" might be used to describe "the correlation between .20 and .30 that is found persistently when virtually any personality dimension inferred from a questionnaire is related to almost any conceivable external criterion involving responses sampled in a *different* medium—that is, not by another questionnaire" [p. 78]. Thus, when we ask a person what his position is on a trait or when we infer it from his response to questionnaire items, we learn almost nothing about his actual behavior.

What Sustains the Belief in Traits?

Mischel therefore contends that there is little evidence for the existence of the broad trait concepts that have been such a standard part of our psychological vocabulary for centuries. From our position of lesser expertise, we agree that a conception of personality emphasizing behavior generality is inadequate and misleading. How does it happen, then, that students of personality have persistently embraced a trait construction of behavior? Why has it taken forty years of negative findings on the question for anyone to propose seriously in a textbook on personality that these trait dimensions may not exist? One answer is that the conclusion is based on inadequate data, another, that the traits have not been measured properly, or still a third, that the wrong traits have been examined. Another answer, and this is a conclusion that Mischel and the present writers prefer, is that traits exist more in the eye of the beholder than in the psyche of the actor.

If we are to uphold the position that personality traits are overattributed, then it is incumbent upon us to account for the widespread belief in their existence. Beliefs in a trait psychology are especially perplexing when held by personality psychologists who have worked in the area and watched the negative evidence accumulate. If the belief in traits is mistaken, there would have to be very strong forces operating to sustain it. We believe there are such forces and have already dealt with two of them: (1) the information-processing biases that conspire to make behavior appear as a manifestation or quality of the actor and (2) the informational deficit of the observer, which prevents disconfirmation of the trait inference. We believe there are still other important reasons for the illusion. In discussing these reasons, it will be helpful to categorize them into sources of informational bias, sources of information-processing bias, and sources of linguistic bias. The discussion draws heavily on similar arguments made by Mischel [1968, 1969] and to a lesser extent on ideas expressed by Heider [1958] and Icheiser [1949].

Informational bias. Apart from the general ignorance one has about the range of behaviors that another person can exhibit, and apart from one's general ignorance of the environmental forces operating on him, there are some quite specific and systematic information deficits that help to turn ignorance into error. As Mischel [1968] notes, most of the people we observe are seen only in a very few roles. Within those already narrow confines, we are likely to see them in a biased sample of situations: when they are at their best or at their worst, when they are at their most harassed or their most relaxed, in their work moods or their play moods, in the morning or in the evening, in the company of people they like or with people they dislike. Those of us who are embedded in a bureaucracy may be especially prone to confuse responses to role requirements with personality dispositions. Bank presidents are usually surprised when the drab, black-suited teller absconds with the funds and is found living it up in Tahiti. To the extent that role and situational factors produce behavior that can be labeled as conforming, hostile, thrifty, brave, clean, or reverent, observers are likely to see the individual as being a conforming, hostile, thrifty, brave, clean, or reverent person.

Beyond the sampling bias produced by roles and situations, one carries with him into a relationship with others a bias in the form of oneself. To the extent that one's own behavior is a restricted sample of possible behaviors, it will evoke a restricted sample from the other person in turn. This point has been anticipated in our previous discussion of the "active observer" and is similar to one made by Kelley and Stahelski [1970]. They point out that one's own behavior may evoke complementary responses in an-

other that one then mistakenly perceives as a manifestation of the other's personality. One may unwittingly shape the other's behavior in a variety of ways: by one's own role- and situation-determined behaviors toward the other, by implicitly communicated expectations and hopes about his behavior, and by a host of personal characteristics such as one's abilities, physical appearance, mannerisms, or social status.

Information-processing bias. Much has been written about the human tendency toward cognitive balance or consistency. Surely the tendency toward consistency must play some role in the observer's assignment of traits. A person who is aggressive in one setting should, to be "consistent," be aggressive in other settings. To see dependence and independence in the same actor may lead to greater subtleties of categorization, or it may lead to misperception of the evidence so that it becomes more consistent. In short, all the cognitive mechanisms of inconsistency reduction can be put to work in the service of dispositional accounts of action. It is not surprising that personal consistency is exaggerated in the eye of the beholder.

The tendencies toward primacy and assimilation discussed by Jones and Goethals [1971] also operate to create illusions of consistency. Out of his needs to impose structure on the environment, the observer often makes premature commitments to the nature of those entities he is observing. Within certain limits of discrepancy, therefore, inconsistent information will be seen as more consistent than it deserves to be. Even beyond these limits, contradictory data can be treated as anomalous, even as the exception that proves the rule.

Mischel [1968] points to still another factor that may encourage us to see people as being more of a piece than they are. The simple fact that another person is physically continuous, always looks more or less the same, and has the same mannerisms, may encourage the impression that there is continuity in his behavior as well. The fact of physical constancy may produce the illusion of behavioral and therefore dispositional consistency.

Linguistic distortions. Language probably facilitates the inference of traits in several ways. Once we have labeled an action as hostile, it is very easy to move to the inference that the perpetrator is a hostile person. Our language allows the same term to be applied to behavior and to the underlying disposition it reflects. It is possible to imagine that we all have little syllogistic subroutines through which we constantly generate trait inferences from act labels: "*lo* has behaved *x*-ly; people who have the *x* trait behave *x*-ly; *o* has the *x* trait." The application of the syllogism will lead to an erroneous trait inference whenever we overlook the fact that there are other reasons for behaving *x*-ly besides having the trait of *x*. Which is to say, often.

It may also be noted that our vocabulary is rich in dispositional or trait terms (the Allport-Ogbert list includes over 18,000 terms) and quite impoverished when it comes to describing the situation. Among personality theorists H. A. Murray [1938] has shown as much sensitivity to this problem as anyone, but his list of environmental "presses" is merely adapted from a complementary list of needs. In social psychology Roger Barker [1968] has stood almost alone in attempting to develop a descriptive taxonomy for behavior settings. His important effort is undoubtedly much impeded by the inadequate resources placed at his disposal by the English language.

The momentum of our linguistic machinery undoubtedly does not stop with the inference of a single trait. Passini and Norman [1966] have shown that the same factor structure is obtained for trait ascriptions to total strangers as for trait ascriptions to well-known acquaintances. This would seem to indicate that we carry trait-intercorrelation matrices around in our heads, or to put it in a more traditional way, that we have implicit personality theories [Jones 1954, Cronbach 1955]. We tend to assume that trait *x* is, in general, associated with trait *y*. This means that we may pass from observation of an act that we label as *x*-like to the inference of an *x* trait to the inference of a *y* trait because of our assumption that traits *x* and *y* are correlated.

The rarity of disconfirmation. Informational bias, processing bias, and linguistic bias all operate, therefore, in such a way as to generate trait inferences where there may be no traits. Are there no mechanisms that can curtail and reverse the errors? There probably are. Certainly the better we know someone, the more restraints there are against facile trait ascription. There are probably sharp limits, however, to the power of additional information to disconfirm a trait ascription. Once we have decided that a person is hostile or dependent, a wide variety of behaviors can be construed as support for this supposition, including even behaviors commonly taken as implying the opposite of the trait ascription. A kind behavior on the part of a "hostile" person may be perceived as insincere, manipulative, or condescending. We are probably all rather adept at the maintenance of a trait inference in the face of disconfirmatory evidence. When practiced by some psychoanalytic writers, the maneuvering can be truly breathtaking.

It might be argued that discussion with others provides ample opportunity for disconfirmation of a trait

inference. The individual may find in such discussion that his trait inferences are not shared. This is undoubtedly true. We can all think of instances where our beliefs about another person have been altered by hearing about someone else's experiences with that person. There are good reasons to expect that our erroneous trait inferences will more often receive consensual validation, however. To the extent that another person resembles oneself in role, status, personal and physical characteristics, he is likely to have the same sorts of experiences with a given person that one has had oneself, and therefore to have made the same trait inferences. It seems likely, moreover, that the more similar two people are the more probable it is that they will discuss the personality of someone they know mutually. The chairman of a department does not often exchange opinions with graduate students on the intelligence or warmth of assistant professors. Finally, when one's trait inferences are flatly contradicted by another person, everything we have said implies that one is likely to explain the contradiction in terms of the dispositions of the person who is contradicting him: "I wonder why John is unable to see the essential kindness of Mary."

In summary, the observer, even when he is a professional psychologist, is apt to conceive of the personalities of others as a collection of broad dispositions or traits, despite the scant empirical evidence for their existence. This conception appears to result from deficits and biases in the information available to the observer and to a variety of biases in the processing of information at the perceptual, cognitive, and linguistic levels. It should be noted, however, that the low empirical validity of the trait concept may be of importance only to the psychologist. The observer, in his daily life, may achieve fairly high predictability using trait inferences that the psychologist can show to be erroneous. If the observer is habitually insulted by a given actor, it may make little difference to the observer whether the reason for this consistent behavior is the hostility of the actor, the actor's dislike of the observer, or the fact that the observer sees the actor only in the early morning when the actor is always grouchy.

The Actor's View: Personality as a Value Matrix

There has been relatively little research on the actor's view of his own personality structure. The individual's implicit theory of his own personality has not usually been singled out for study by personality theorists, probably because it is generally assumed that actors regard themselves only as "instances" of personalities generally. Much that we have said about the actor's perspective on his own behavior prompts the suggestion that this assumption may not be correct.

Mischel has noted that "Dispositional theories try to categorize behaviors in terms of the hypothesized historical psychic forces that diverse behaviors supposedly serve; but it is also possible to categorize the behaviors in terms of the unifying, evoking, and maintaining conditions that they jointly share" [1969, p. 1016]. Mischel, of course, prefers the latter conception of individual differences as the more nearly accurate account.

We would suggest that the actor's view of his own personality is close to the conception preferred by Mischel. Consistent with the actor's strong preference for assigning causal significance to the situation, he tends to focus on Mischel's "evoking and maintaining conditions" as the stimuli guiding his own behavior. Whereas observers operate as trait psychologists, actors may operate as contingent reinforcement theorists, mapping their behavioral plans in terms of perceived reinforcement potentials. The observer, we have argued, processes actions in a nomothetic, taxonomic way, and is thus likely to construe behavior on what Allport [1937] would call a common trait basis. The actor, if he thinks of himself as having traits at all, is likely to see an "individual trait" (the term again is Allport's), expressing the congruity of interrelated purposes. When the actor steps back to view himself, he is probably inclined to emphasize not the superficial topography of behavior but the underlying purposes mediated by the behavior. The actor is consequently more likely to conceive of his personality as a configuration of values and strategies than as a collection of response dispositions. When the actor compares himself to others, we might expect him to believe that he differs chiefly in the priorities that he assigns to his goals and in the particular means he has devised to achieve them.

We have criticized the observer harshly for his errors, and to be fair we should note that the actor is also likely to make some mistakes. We have already observed that people fail to distinguish between primary and secondary qualities and tend to blur the distinction between perceptions and evaluations. The actor probably consistently errs by ignoring the role of his own biases in responding to situations. In Lewinian terms the actor locates the valence in the object rather than the need in himself. If the observer assumes that people are more different than they are, the actor probably assumes that he is too much like everyone else—that the qualities he sees in the en-

vironment are really there, and not a product of his own motives and expectancies.

In quite another sense, however, the actor is likely to conceive of himself as more unique than he is. Each actor lacks knowledge of the population base rates for various experiences, beliefs, and motives. There may exist, in effect, a sort of pluralistic ignorance of the human condition. If so, it might account for what Meehl [1956] has called the "P. T. Barnum effect," the readiness of the client to accept as uniquely applicable a clinician's assessment of himself that could in fact apply to almost everyone. Stagner [1958] and Ulrich, Stachnick, and Stainton [1963] have capitalized on this kind of egocentric attribution in clever demonstrations of the susceptibility of businessmen and college students, respectively, to allegedly tailor-made diagnoses of their personality. Each subject was given an identical personality description ("Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic"; "Sexual adjustment has presented some difficulties for you") and asked to comment on its accuracy. The great majority of the subjects were impressed by what they perceived as a penetrating analysis, with some expressing the view that they had been helped by these insights into their characters.

Personality Traits Are Things Other People Have

If it is true that actors and observers have different conceptions of personality structure along the lines we have discussed, then it should be the case that each individual perceives every other individual to have more stable personality traits than he himself possesses. He should view others as having generalized response dispositions but himself as acting in accord with the demands and opportunities inherent in each new situation. In order to test this proposition, Nisbett and Caputo [1971] constructed a variant of the standard trait description questionnaire. A list of twenty polar adjectives ("reserved–emotionally expressive;" "lenient–firm") was presented to subjects, along with the option, for each dimension, "depends on the situation." Each of the male college student subjects was asked to check one of the three alternatives for each trait dimension for each of five people: himself, his best friend, an age peer whom the subject liked but did not know well, his father, and (to fill in the remaining cell of the young–old, familiar–unfamiliar matrix) the television commentator Walter Cronkite. In line with anticipations, subjects were likely to use the "depends on the situation" category for themselves but quite willing to assign traits to the other stimulus persons. Neither degree of acquaintance nor similarity in age was a very potent determinant of the willingness to ascribe traits to others: subjects assigned traits in about equal numbers to each of the other stimulus persons.

We have already discussed a large number of cognitive factors that would be expected to produce Nisbett and Caputo's findings. Perhaps we should add to the list the individual's desire for control over his environment. Brehm [1966] has written at some length on the strength of man's desire to see himself as free in varied ways and the "reactance" created by threats to behavioral freedom. The perception of freedom is probably best maintained by simultaneously ascribing traits to others and denying them in oneself. When the observer infers the existence of a trait, this gives him the happy, if sometimes illusory, feeling of predictability of behavior and therefore of control over the environment. On the other hand, the individual would lose the sense of freedom to the extent that he acknowledged powerful dispositions in himself, traits that imperiously cause him to behave consistently across situations.

The reader may have noticed that this last paragraph represents virtually our only consideration of traditional motivational concepts. In the final section, we will discuss in some detail the role of motives that are perhaps even more powerful than reactance.

Motivational Influences on Attribution Processes

Perhaps we have gone as far as we can go by acting as though man's motives are exclusively cognitive –that all he wants is to test and structure reality so that he can respond appropriately to it. There are many other motives that affect information processing, the most obtrusive of which is probably the motive to maintain or enhance one's self-esteem. Our examples of actor-observer differences in processing information have more frequently involved blameworthy than praiseworthy acts. Is it possible that most of the facts may be explained by merely invoking the notion that actors try to excuse their reprehensible actions by blaming them on circumstances, whereas observers are coldly, perhaps gleefully, ready to put the shoe of blame on the actor's foot? Have we perhaps erected a fanciful cognitive edifice to surround and obscure this simple principle of human pettiness?

Our answer is a qualified no. We have emphasized –perhaps overemphasized–the role of cognitive and perceptual factors in developing our major theme. We have argued that both actors and observers are concerned with processing useful information and suggested that action cues and situation cues are utilized differentially by them. We would now like to acknowledge that motivational factors may often

serve to exaggerate the broad tendencies that we have tried to describe. At the same time, however, we would also like to express the opinion that motivational factors may often mute those tendencies.

Perhaps the simplest way of describing what we believe to be the relationship between the divergent biases of actor and observer and motivational factors such as the desire to maintain self-esteem is to suggest that the biases are generally found even when the act in question is neutral affectively and morally and when the observer holds a neutral opinion toward the actor. If the action is reprehensible, the tendency of actors to attribute to the situation is undoubtedly enhanced ("You would have done the same in my shoes."). If the action is praiseworthy, on the other hand, this tendency is probably muted and perhaps often reversed ("Class will tell."). We also readily grant that, when the observer has a favorable opinion of the actor who performs a praiseworthy act, a dispositional inference is more likely. (Alan Jay Lerner's father is supposed to have responded to an opening night patron's comment that his son was a lucky man, "Yes, and I've noticed that the harder he works, the luckier he gets.") The tendency to infer dispositional causes is undoubtedly also enhanced when the observer dislikes the actor who performs a blameworthy act. ("What can you expect from people like that?") Again, however, the observer's bias can just as easily be reversed, as when the observer likes the perpetrator of bad acts ("The other boys made him do it") or dislikes the performer of good acts ("You must have caught him in a good mood").

Whether it is ecologically more frequent that our proposition is set back or given a boost by motivational factors depends on parameters we are not likely ever to know, such as the relative frequency of blameworthy and praiseworthy acts and the probability of liking actors versus disliking them. The more answerable question is whether or not the attributional biases exist when there is no reason to assume that motivational purposes are served by them. As should be clear, we strongly believe this to be so. As Leventhal has pointed out, a set of stimuli may give rise to both motivational and cognitive processes. It is unwarranted to assume in such an instance that one set of processes determines or even affects the other. In fact, we suspect that the attributional biases often hold even when motivational purposes are thwarted by them. The accidental hero seems often to be quite convinced that others would have been heroic in the same spot. The selfless missionary and the Nobel scientist are probably well aware of external incentives and ulterior motives that cloud the picture of virtue conveyed by their actions.

However powerful motivational factors may be, it should be noted that here, as in other psychological contexts, there is an inherent conflict between the "pleasure principle" and the "reality principle." Jones and Gerard [1967] have discussed the general conflict between these two orientations under the heading of the "basic antimony," and suggest that the pleasure principle is dominant in the postdecisional phase, whereas the reality principle is dominant when action and choice are still possible. We may want to believe that we are responsible for our good acts, always and exclusively, but such a belief is not very adaptive in the long run.

It should be emphasized, finally, that we have dealt with only a few of the motives that interact with attribution processes. The individual, whether he is an actor or an observer, is a self-esteem enhancer, a balance maintainer, a dissonance reducer, a reactance reliever, a seeker after truth, and more. The relative strength of these motives, in competition with one another and with more purely cognitive processes, is a problem best pursued empirically.

Summary and Conclusions

Actors tend to attribute the causes of their behavior to stimuli inherent in the situation, while observers tend to attribute behavior to stable dispositions of the actor. This is due in part to the actor's more detailed knowledge of his circumstances, history, motives, and experiences. Perhaps more importantly, the tendency is a result of the differential salience of the information available to both actor and observer. For the observer behavior is figural against the ground of the situation. For the actor it is the situational cues that are figural and that are seen to elicit behavior. Moreover, the actor is inclined to think of his judgments about the situational cues as being perceptions or accurate readings of them. These cues are therefore more "real" as well as more salient than they are for the observer. Behavior is thus seen by the observer to be a manifestation of the actor and seen by the actor to be a response to the situation.

The observer often errs by overattributing dispositions, including the broadest kind of dispositions–personality traits. The evidence for personality traits as commonly conceived is sparse. The widespread belief in their existence appears to be due to the observer's failure to realize that the samples of behavior that he sees are not random, as well as to the observer's tendency to see behavior as a manifestation of the actor rather than a response to situational cues. A variety of additional perceptual, cognitive, and linguistic processes help to sustain the belief in traits.

It is suggested that the individual's view of his own personality differs from his view of the person-

alities of others. The individual may be inclined to view his own personality as consisting of "individual traits," values, goal priorities, and means of attaining goals. The actor may simultaneously view his own personality as being more unique than it is and his own behavior as being more appropriate to given situations than is the behavior of others.

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