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Differential Attribution of Trait-Descriptive Terms to Oneself as Compared to Well-Liked, Neutral, and Disliked Others: A Psychometric Analysis

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A prominent tenet of attribution theory holds that individuals are more likely to view their own behavior as caused by the situation and the behavior of others as caused by underlying personality dispositions. While this hypothesis has been tested in many ways, one of the most direct is to ask subjects to describe themselves and others using sets of personality-descriptive terms. A comprehensive set of 2,800 trait terms was administered to 14 samples of 100 subjects (50 males and 50 females) to describe themselves and three others they knew well—one person they liked well, one they disliked, and one toward whom they were neutral. There was a significant tendency for individuals to use the situational response option most often for themselves, slightly less often for a neutral other, and least often for either a well-liked or a disliked other. Over 92% of the 2,800 terms and 85% of the 1,400 subjects showed the hypothesized effect. Additionally, in two replication studies, those terms that were found to differ most significantly in situational attribution between oneself and a well-liked other were administered to two samples of subjects under differing instructional conditions. Methodological problems plaguing research of this type are demonstrated and discussed.

One major conclusion that has been drawn from the recent explosion of research on trait attribution (e.g., Harvey, Ickes, & Kidd, 1976; Jones et al., 1972; Shaver, 1975) is that individuals tend to explain their own behavior in more "situational" ways and the behavior of others in more "dispositional" ways. It is as if the typical subject in attribution experiments appears to be thinking, "Jane is friendly and Jim is aloof, while with me, it all depends on the situation." For recent reviews of the many studies supporting this conjecture, see Jones (1976), Monson and Snyder (1977), and Ross (1977).

While a wide variety of different methodologies have been employed to verify this general attributional hypothesis, one of the most direct tests is to ask subjects whether a particular trait-descriptive term clearly is (or clearly is not) an accurate description of themselves and/or of some other individual or, alternatively, whether one just cannot say because "it depends on the situation." For example, in one of the earliest tests of this hypothesis (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973), 24 subjects were asked to indicate whether each of 20 trait terms, their antonyms, or the phrase "depends on the situation" provided the best

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description of themselves and of four others (their father, their best friend, an admired acquaintance, and Walter Cronkite). There was a significant tendency for subjects to use the situational option most often for themselves (average = 8 times out of 20) and least often for Walter Cronkite (average = 5 times out of 20).

Does this finding depend on the particular trait terms employed? Herzberger and Clore (in press), who investigated this possibility, instructed 55 college undergraduates to rate themselves and their best friends on each of 16 antonym pairs, again with a "depends on the situation" response option. Although they found a general tendency for the situational response to be used more often for descriptions of oneself than of others, a few antonym pairs showed the opposite effect. This evidence that terms may differ in eliciting self versus other situational responses is far from conclusive, however, for a number of reasons: (a) The subject sample was quite small, and (b)—of much greater importance—very few terms were employed, and these terms were not selected in such a way as to insure that the trait domain had been sampled systematically, much less comprehensively.

Yet, one recently formulated theory of the attribution process predicts that this phenomenon *should* be highly related to the particular traits under study. In a wide-ranging review of the attribution literature, Monson and Snyder (1977) have advanced the following major hypothesis:

> Actors should make more situational attributions than should observers about behavioral acts that are under situational control; by contrast, actors' perceptions of behavior that are under dispositional control ought to be more dispositional than the perceptions of observers. (p. 96)

Seemingly, some trait terms must describe behavioral acts that are more under situational control than do other terms, and consequently one might expect from the Monson and Snyder position an interaction between the type of trait term under study and the direction of its attribution (more situational versus more dispositional) to oneself as compared to others.

Fortuitously, long before the formulation of the original attribution hypothesis, Warren Norman (Note 1) gathered attributions of each of 2,800 English trait terms from 100 subjects (50 males and 50 females) for themselves and for three other individuals whom they knew very well—one person they liked, one they disliked, and one about whom they were neutral. Thus, it is now possible to use these data to analyze both the original and the revised (Monson & Snyder, 1977) attribution hypotheses in a far more comprehensive fashion than has heretofore been possible. The present report, which includes the findings from an extensive analysis of Norman's important data, has four major aims: (a) to analyze the use of the situational response option as a function of the sex of the subject, the target (oneself or each of the three types of others), and the item pool (all 2,800 terms or subsets of the more common and less difficult terms); (b) to ascertain whether the original attribution conclusion is actually reversed for certain types of trait terms, as might be predicted by Monson and Snyder; (c) to replicate in two subsequent studies the major findings discovered with Norman's data, thereby demonstrating the robustness of these findings across differing phrasings of the situational response option; and finally (d)—of greatest importance—to caution future investigators who may be tempted to elect this particular type of procedure about some severe methodological problems that serve to cloud any substantive interpretations they may wish to draw.

Study 1

Method

Terms Employed

All words in contemporary American English describing aspects of personality were assembled by Norman (Note 1) from two lexicons: (a) the set of terms drawn by Allport and Odbert (1936) from the 1925 unabridged edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* and (b) *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* (1961). The total pool numbered roughly 27,000 terms, or nearly 5% of the estimated number of words in the English language. The pool of terms actually used by Norman in constructing his initial catalogue numbered 18,125; this set included all 17,954 from the Allport–Odbert monograph, plus 171 additions from the set of new terms listed in *Webster's Third.*

Four criteria for excluding terms were then applied. To be excluded on one of these criteria, a term had to be so categorized by at least three of the four members of Norman's research team; terms for which disagreements could not be resolved were always retained. The four exclusion categories were: (a) *Obscurity.* Roughly 20% of the terms have obscure literary, historical, or mythological referents and are virtually never used in contemporary discourse (e.g., *acaroid, bevering, davered*). (b) *Ambiguity.* Another 25% of the terms refer to such broad classes of attributes or behaviors, or entail the use of such extended metaphors or analogies, that their relevance to personality is not clear (e.g., *absolute, canine, entire*). (c) *Appearance.* Approximately 5% of the terms denote purely anatomical or physiognomic characteristics, medical symptoms, or physical aspects of behaviors, movements, location, appearance, grooming, or dress (e.g., *ailing, baritone, chubby*). (d) *Pure evaluation.* Finally, about 5% of the terms are almost purely evaluative or are merely quantifiers of degree or amount for whatever substantive term they modify (e.g., *awful, bad, fine*).

The approximately 7,300 terms not excluded on one of these four criteria were then sorted by the consensus of the Norman research team into three major categories: (a) *Stable traits;* (b) *Temporary states, moods, and activities;* and (c) *Social roles, relationships, and effects.* Slightly under 40% of the retained terms were classified as stable traits (e.g., *daring, imaginative, lazy, persistent*), slightly more than 40% as temporary states (e.g., *hesitant, peeved, sad, ranting*), and roughly 20% as social roles or relationships (e.g., *employed, manageable, noted, respected*).

Procedures and Subjects

The 2,800 terms categorized by Norman (Note 1) as stable traits were divided into 14 lists of 200. Each list was administered to a different sample of 50 male and 50 female highly paid, volunteer, undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. First, the subjects were asked to give a synonym or a short definition for each term or, alternatively, to cross out the word if they had no idea of its meaning. The percentage of subjects crossing out each term provides an index of its difficulty level. Second, the subjects rated the degree to which each term with which they were familiar described themselves and each of three self-selected peers—one of whom they liked, one to whom they were indifferent, and one of whom they disliked. Third, and finally, the subjects judged each term's social desirability, using a nine-category rating scale.

For the second task, that of describing themselves and others, the subjects used the following rating scale:

0 = the word is *not* a good or accurate description.
1 = the word is *only partly or occasionally* descriptive.
2 = the word *is* a particularly good or accurate description.

We will assume at this point that the 1 response is more "situational" than the 0 and 2 responses—an assumption that will be empirically tested (and supported) in Studies 2 and 3.

In analyzing these data, the proportion of subjects giving a 1, or situational, response was always based solely on the subsample of subjects who gave 0, 1, or 2 responses; that is, subjects who crossed out the term to indicate that they did not know its meaning were excluded from the sample on which the response percentages were based. As a consequence, the situational response proportions are not confounded with difficulty level.

Because doubtful words were always retained by the Norman research team, the total pool of 2,800 terms contains many relatively unfamiliar, dated, and ambiguous words. Indeed, only about one third of the terms were rated by all 100 of the subjects. An additional 20% were rated by all but one or two subjects, and roughly 1,750 of the 2,800 terms were rated by 96% or more of the subjects. All analyses were carried out on the total pool of 2,800 terms and also on two smaller subsets. Of the 2,800 terms in the initial pool, 233 are nouns (e.g., *aesthete, alarmist, automaton*), and the remainder are adjectives. All of the nouns, plus the most difficult of the adjectives (e.g., *prolix, phrenetic, inured, fulminatory*), were deleted from the 2,800-term pool, resulting in the first subset of 1,666 terms. Of these, the most awkward, stilted, ambiguous, and uncommon (in the opinion of the present author) were then excluded, resulting in a final subset of 731 relatively familiar trait-descriptive terms.

Analyses

Norman's (Note 1) data were employed to analyze the use of the situational response option as a function of (a) the sex of the subject, (b) the target being described, and (c) the nature of the pool of terms. Additional analyses were focused on the extent to which particular terms tend to elicit more situational responses to self-descriptions than to descriptions of a well-liked other.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean proportions of males and females using the situational response option in each of the three pools of terms, for each of the four targets. Table 2 summarizes three repeated measures analyses of variance for these data—one for each of the three pools—with sex and target treated as fixed effects. These results replicate the original findings of Nisbett et al. (1973): There was a significant tendency for individuals to use the situational response option most often for themselves, slightly less often for a neutral

other, and least often for either a well-liked or a disliked other. There was a much smaller, yet still highly significant, tendency for males to use the situational option more often than females. And, finally, there was a small but significant interaction between the sex of the subject and the type of target, the situational responses of males and females being quite similar for descriptions of disliked others and least similar for descriptions of themselves and well-liked others. All of these results were highly consistent across the three pools of terms.

Although most terms may elicit more situational responses for descriptions of oneself than of others, Monson and Snyder (1977) might predict that some terms should produce the diametrically opposite effect. To test this hypothesis, one must compare the descriptions of oneself with those of another. While well-liked, neutral, and disliked others are all potential targets for such a comparison, the former is certainly the most critical, since people tend to interact most with those whom they like best, and thus they tend to know the characteristics of their friends far better than those of others. Moreover, since most individuals tend to evaluate themselves and their friends positively, differences between descriptions of oneself and of well-liked others are not confounded by massive differences in the evaluation of the two targets.[1]

For each subject and each of the 2,800 terms, an index of differential usage of the situational response option (Δ) was calculated by comparing the self-descriptions with those of a well-liked other; all instances of a situational response in self-description paired with a nonsituational response (either 0 or 2) in the description of a well-liked other received a value of +1, whereas the opposite case received a value of −1. The vast majority of response pairs—situational responses in the descriptions of neither or both of these targets—received values of 0. The previously reported analyses of variance were then repeated, now using these Δ values.

There were no significant differences in average Δ values between the male and female subsamples, nor were there any substantial differences among the pools of terms. Across all 2,800 terms, Δ ranged from +.38 for the term *ill-tempered* (the situational response employed far more often for descriptions of oneself than for those of a well-liked other) to −.15 for the term *sentimental* (the situational response employed somewhat more often for descriptions of another than for self-

Table 1
Proportions of Males and Females Using the Situational Response Option for the Average Term in Each of Three Pools of Terms, When Describing Themselves and Well-Liked, Neutral, and Disliked Others

Target	Males (n = 50)		Females (n = 50)		Total (n = 100)
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
All 2,800 terms					
Self	.43	.14	.39	.16	.41
Well-liked other	.34	.13	.31	.14	.32
Neutral other	.40	.12	.37	.13	.39
Disliked other	.33	.10	.33	.10	.33
M	.38		.35		.36
1,666 terms					
Self	.44	.13	.41	.15	.42
Well-liked other	.35	.12	.31	.13	.33
Neutral other	.41	.11	.39	.12	.40
Disliked other	.33	.09	.33	.10	.33
M	.38		.36		.37
731 terms					
Self	.46	.13	.42	.14	.44
Well-liked other	.36	.12	.32	.13	.34
Neutral other	.42	.11	.40	.11	.41
Disliked other	.33	.09	.34	.10	.33
M	.39		.37		.38

Note. The proportions are based solely on subjects who gave one of the three response alternatives.

[1] If evidence for this seemingly self-evident proposition is necessary, it is provided in Table 7, presented later in this report. The correlations between endorsement and desirability are about .90 both for descriptions of oneself and for a well-liked other; in contrast, the correlation is roughly .70 for descriptions of a neutral other, and it is negative for descriptions of a disliked other. These findings closely replicate those reported two decades ago by Edwards (1959).

Table 2
Results of Analyses of Variance: Sex × Target in Each of Three Pools of Terms

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	ω^2
		All 2,800 terms				
Sex	3.4	1	3.39	84.9	.001	.003
Between-subjects error	223.3	5,598	.04			
Targets	31.4	3	10.46	1,262.4	.001	.143
Sex × Targets	1.4	3	.48	58.2	.001	.006
Within-subjects error	139.2	16,794	.01			
		1,666 terms				
Sex	1.8	1	1.79	53.4	.001	.003
Between-subjects error	111.8	3,330	.03			
Targets	22.2	3	7.39	888.1	.001	.165
Sex × Targets	.8	3	.27	32.0	.001	.006
Within-subjects error	83.2	9,990	.01			
		731 terms				
Sex	.6	1	.59	21.2	.001	.003
Between-subjects error	40.6	1,460	.03			
Targets	11.8	3	3.95	448.0	.001	.185
Sex × Targets	.5	3	.17	19.8	.001	.008
Within-subjects error	38.6	4,380	.01			

descriptions). Over 92% of the 2,800 terms produced positive Δ values, the average term producing a Δ of +.10. When an average Δ value was calculated for each of the 1,400 subjects (across the 200 terms to which that subject responded), 85% of these values were positive; individual differences in Δ ranged from −.24 to +.44, the median Δ being +.07. These findings again serve to confirm the original hypothesis of Nisbett et al. (1973), since 85% of the subjects and well over 90% of the trait-descriptive terms in English showed the general pattern of situational responses which they hypothesized.

To discover whether the differences among the terms in their Δ values are related to other psychometric characteristics, Δ was correlated with indexes of word difficulty, social desirability mean, dispersion, and extremeness, as well as with other indexes to be described later in this report. Unfortunately, Δ was virtually unpredictable by these indexes, either singly or when they were combined via multiple regression analysis. Nor was its relation to content or meaning immediately apparent, although there was some evidence that potentially more easily observable traits (e.g., *imitative, unpretentious, selfish, pleasant, miserly*) tended to elicit highly positive Δ values, whereas potentially more subjective traits (e.g., *self-examining, self-critical, sentimental, soft-hearted, open-minded*) tended to elicit lower or negative Δ values. Before trying to relate such differences in content to those predicted by Monson and Snyder (1977), it is important to discover whether they reflect stable characteristics or are merely sample specific. As a consequence, it is necessary to replicate these findings, using a different sample of subjects.

Study 2

Method

Terms Employed

From the original study, 20 terms with high and 20 terms with low Δ values were selected; only relatively common and unambiguous terms were included in each set, which were roughly matched on their social desirability values. The 20 terms in each set are listed in Table 3. Twenty additional terms—15 from the original set of 2,800, plus 5 others—were selected in order to span the trait domain as broadly as possible. These 60 terms were then listed alphabetically—the terms from each of the three sets thus being intermixed in a quasi-random order—on each of two forms. One of these was entitled "Describing Your-

Table 3
Differential Use of the Situational Response Option When Describing Oneself Versus a Well-Liked Other: The Highly Differentiating Terms That Were Employed in Study 2

Situational response used more often for self than for other			Situational response used more often for other than for self		
Term	Study 1	Study 2	Term	Study 1	Study 2
Ill-tempered	.38	.16	Sentimental	−.15	.00
Imitative[a]	.31	.25	Self-critical[a]	−.14	−.15
Inconsistent	.31	.09	Overstudious[a]	−.12	−.10
Selfish[a]	.30	.25	Sarcastic	−.12	.12
Miserly[a]	.30	.23	Disorganized	−.11	.10
Pleasant[a]	.29	.24	Emotional	−.11	.16
Absent-minded	.28	.19	Curious	−.10	−.05
Boastful	.28	.07	Uninquisitive	−.10	.15
Fidgety	.26	.12	Open-minded[a]	−.09	−.07
Vibrant	.26	.07	Moral	−.08	−.05
Impulsive	.26	.10	Sensitive	−.08	.14
Conceitless	.25	.14	Deliberate	−.07	−.02
Patient	.25	.04	Forward	−.06	.00
Impatient	.25	.15	Soft-hearted	−.06	−.02
Industrious	.25	.04	Shortsighted	−.06	.19
Informative	.25	.02	Eager	−.06	.15
Innovative	.25	−.09	Self-examining[a]	−.05	−.16
Unpretentious[a]	.24	.22	Particular	−.05	.02
Benevolent	.24	.01	Narrow-minded	−.05	.01
Inner-directed	.24	−.10	Self-satisfied	−.05	.02
M	.27	.11		−.09	.02

Note. The values in this table are differences between two proportions: (a) the proportion of subjects who used the situational response option when describing themselves but not when describing a well-liked other and (b) the proportion of subjects who used the situational option when describing a well-liked other but not when describing themselves. The tabled values are equal to (a) − (b).
[a] The most consistent terms of each type.

self" ("Here are 60 common adjectives which people use to describe some of the important ways that individuals differ from one another. Please use this list to describe yourself as accurately as you can"); the other was entitled "Describing a Person You Know Well" ("Please use this list to describe someone you know very well and like as a person. The person you select should be of the same sex as you are and about your own age").

Procedure

One difference between the procedures employed by Nisbett et al. (1973) and those employed by Norman (Note 1) lies in the wording of their respective "situational" response options: "depends on the situation" versus "only partly or occasionally descriptive." Since the former phrase might be construed as more situationally focused than the latter, the two sets of findings—though empirically quite equivalent—could reflect somewhat different response processes. To reduce this potential source of ambiguity, a situational response option was used which bridges both alternatives: "1 = the word is only occasionally descriptive—in other words, if it depends on the situation." The other two response alternatives were the same as those used in Study 1: "0 = the word is *not* a good or accurate description," and "2 = the word *is* a good or accurate description."

Subjects

Students from the University of Oregon Law School were recruited and paid a generous hourly wage to work on a wide variety of tasks, among them the present one, over a period of 2 or 3 months. Of 91 subjects, 46 first described themselves and a month or so later described their self-selected other; for the other 45 subjects, the order of these two tasks was reversed.

Results

When the proportion of situational responses elicited by each of the 55 terms employed in Study 1 was compared with that in Study 2, the correlations between these situa-

Table 4
Proportion of Subjects Using the Situational Response Option for the Average Term in Each of the Three Sets When Describing Themselves and When Describing a Well-Liked Other

	Describing oneself		Describing another		Self − Other (Δ)	
Term set	A	B	A	B	1	2
20 high Δ	.53	.51	.39	.42	.10	.13
20 control	.45	.43	.37	.40	.04	.06
20 low Δ	.44	.45	.40	.44	.00	.05
All 60 terms	.47	.46	.39	.42	.05	.08
Analyses of variance						
Order	*ns.*		*ns.*		*ns.*	
Term set	.001		*ns.*		.001	
Order × Set	*ns.*		*ns.*		*ns.*	

Note. Sample 1 subjects (n = 46) first described themselves (Session A) and later described another (Session B); Sample 2 subjects (n = 45) described another in Session A and themselves in Session B.

tional response proportions in the two studies were .63 for self-descriptions and .62 for the descriptions of another. For the Δ values, interstudy convergence was a more modest .40.

The major demonstration for Study 1—that individuals are more prone to use the situational response when describing themselves than others—was again confirmed: For the average of the 55 terms common to both studies, self-descriptions elicited a higher proportion of situational responses (.45 in Study 1 and .47 in Study 2) than did descriptions of a well-liked other (.36 in Study 1 and .40 in Study 2). Of the 60 terms, 43 (72%) elicited positive Δ values. Of the 91 subjects, 62 (68%) used the situational response more frequently when describing themselves than another.

Table 4 presents the proportions of subjects using the situational response option for the average term in the high Δ, low Δ, and control sets of 20 terms. Three two-way repeated measures analyses of variance on the proportions displayed in Table 4 showed large effects due to the term sets for the situational responses in self-descriptions and for the Δ values, and nonsignificant effects associated with both the administration order and the interaction between the term sets and order. While these results demonstrate that subsets of terms displaying highly significant average differences in Δ can be selected, they also show the difficulty in finding individual terms that will consistently elicit *negative* Δ values in diverse samples. That is, the general effect hypothesized by Nisbett et al. (1973)—that situational responses are more frequently attributed to oneself than to another—is so strong that any *differential* tendencies of terms, the prediction of Monson and Snyder (1977), are likely to be far more ephemeral. Nonetheless, to the extent to which one can generalize from these two studies, terms such as *self-critical* and *open-minded,* as well as *overstudious* in student samples, are likely candidates for eliciting negative Δ values, whereas terms such as *imitative, selfish, miserly, pleasant,* and *unpretentious* are likely to elicit especially highly positive Δ values. Whether these differences relate to the extent to which the traits are generally viewed as under "situational" as compared to "dispositional" control, as predicted by Monson and Snyder (1977), must await further research.

The "Meaning" of a Situational Response

The findings presented so far appear on the surface to be reasonably unambiguous. In both studies, subjects tended to use the situational response option more often when describing themselves than when describing others. Such a finding is congruent with the steadily increasing body of literature that demonstrates this effect with measures other than self-reports (Jones, 1976). As a conse-

quence, investigators may be tempted to assume that the very same *processes* operate in studies utilizing the far cheaper and easier self-report methodology than in those using other more costly types of experimental procedures. The major argument which will now be advanced is that the procedures employed in Studies 1 and 2 of the present report, and those employed previously by such investigators as Nisbett et al. (1973) and Herzberger and Clore (in press), do not, in and of themselves, provide compelling evidence regarding the situational versus dispositional locus of attributions to oneself and others. As we will see by detailed psychometric analyses of the data already reported, plus some additional data, the meaning of a situational response is fraught with ambiguity. In order to present and document this argument, it will now be necessary to take a far more analytic approach to the meaning of the situational response in self-reports.

Predicting Situational Response Proportions

To begin, let us return to Study 1, the data collected by Norman (Note 1). Table 5 lists the particular terms that elicited the most and the least situational responses for each of the four targets employed in that study. The terms that elicit the most situational responses are primarily desirable but difficult (e.g., *assuasive, placable, perspicacious*). On the other hand, terms eliciting the least situational responses tend to be very extreme terms —primarily highly undesirable ones (e.g., *illiterate, uneducated, inhumane*).

Is it possible to predict the proportion of situational responses elicited by a term solely on the basis of the term's desirability and difficulty level? Table 6 presents the results of some correlational analyses within each of the three pools of terms, using as a criterion the proportion of subjects giving a situational response to the term and using as predictors (a) word difficulty (the proportion of subjects who crossed out the term, indicating that they did not know its meaning); (b) the mean social desirability rating of the term; and (c) desirability extremeness (the squared difference between the term's mean desirability rating and 5, the midpoint of the rating scale), which was included in these analyses to assess the nonlinear relationship between situational attribution and desirability. Included in Table 6 are the means and standard deviations of each of the three predictors and their intercorrelations, as well as their correlations with the situational response criterion.

The means and standard deviations displayed in Table 6 show the effects of successively refining the pool of terms, from the initial 2,800 terms to the 1,666 and then to the 731 subsets. The major differences between the three pools of terms are in word difficulty: In the 2,800-term pool, the average term was crossed out by over 10% of the subjects, as compared to roughly 5% in the two smaller pools. In addition, the refinement process progressively produced subsets of terms with mean social desirability ratings nearer to 5, the midpoint of the rating scale.

Although the terms listed in Table 5 suggest that situational response elicitation may be highly related to word difficulty, at least in the total 2,800-term pool, the values in Table 6 show that this conjecture is unfounded; the correlations between situational attribution and difficulty were all near zero. On the other hand, the situational proportions are quite highly related to the mean of the social desirability ratings, as illustrated in Figure 1. This relationship is curvilinear for descriptions of oneself and a well-liked other—extreme terms, either positive or negative, eliciting far fewer situational responses than less extreme (more modal) ones. A linear combination of two variables, social desirability mean and extremeness (the squared distance from the midpoint of the rating scale) yielded multiple correlations between .60 and .70 for descriptions of oneself and of a well-liked other. For descriptions of a neutral other, the relationship is linear, with correlations around .50—the more desirable the term, the more situational responses elicited by it. For descriptions of disliked others, situational elicitation was not highly predictable from any combination of these four variables.

In order to understand the relationships displayed in Figure 1, one must realize that in this as in all previous self-report studies, the situational response is also the middle, neu-

Table 5
Some Terms That Elicit Very High and Very Low Proportions of Situational Responses

Target	Least situational terms				Most situational terms			
	% situational	Pool 731	Pool 1,666	Pool 2,800	% situational	Pool 731	Pool 1,666	Pool 2,800
Self	2			Illiterate	81			Assuasive
	3			Overwomanly	74			Placable
	4		Inhumane		73		Unheroic	
	4			Oily	72			Modifiable
	5			Murderous	72			Adroit
	5			Ill-bred	71	Concise		
	5			Birdlike	71			Concentrative
	6			Simpleton	70		Indivertible	
	6		Uneducated		70			Quick-sighted
	6			Untaught	69	Variable		
Well-liked other	1			Illiterate	73			Tractable
	2			Overwomanly	69			Modifiable
	3			Simpleton	65			Placable
	3		Ignorant		63			Assuasive
	3			Bloodthirsty	63			Alterable
	4			Murderous	63		Provokable	
	4			Untrustworthy	61		Unswayable	
	4			Weak-minded	61			Perspicacious
	5		Companionable		61		Brainy	
	5			Inhuman	61	Stubborn		
Neutral other	6			Illiterate	74			Perspicacious
	6			Overfierce	71			Assuasive
	7			Phrenetic	67			Mitigative
	8			Untaught	67	Affable		
	10		Uneducated		67			Sententious
	10		Inhumane		65			Recondite
	10			Thievish	65	Accommodating		
	11			Beastlike	64	Understanding		
	11			Overwomanly	64	Big-hearted		
	11			Murderous	64	Pleasant		
Disliked other	6			Illiterate	62			Strident
	6			Overmodest	60			Well-disposed
	6			Overpatient	60			Splenetic
	7			Hermitish	58			Alacrious
	8			Overtrusting	57			Mendacious
	8			Overrefined	57			Dispatchful
	10			Birdlike	57			Felicitous
	10		Meek		56			Veridical
	10			Lamblike	56			Sententious
	10			Toil-worn	55			Lucky

Note. The terms are listed by pool: All terms listed in the 731 column are also included in the 1,666 and 2,800 pools; all terms listed in the 1,666 column are also included in the 2,800 pool.

tral, or uncertain response, other things being equal. Thus, Figure 1 may display a critical component of trait attribution as reflected in self-reports. For those we like, including ourselves, the more extreme the desirability of a trait, the less ambiguous and less situational is our attribution; we, and our friends, are clearly "good" and equally clearly not "bad." For those toward whom our feelings are more neutral (perhaps because we know them less well), the more desirable the trait, the more ambiguous and/or situational is our attribution; neutral others are clearly not "bad" (if they were, we would dislike them), but we are

not sure (yet) whether they are consistently "good." And, finally, for those we dislike, our attributions are more complex; our enemies are not *all* "bad," nor are they *never* "good." Yet, since we dislike them, they cannot be uniformly "good" on all traits; what we say of them is that they combine "good" and "bad" qualities. Specifically, we tend to perceive those we dislike as rather clearly *boastful, gossipy,* and *insincere,* yet rather clearly not *uneducated, slow-witted,* or *gluttonous* (low situational locus, low desirability terms). They are clearly not *tactful, humanitarian, considerate, sincere, trustworthy,* or *ingenious* (low situational locus, high desirability terms). On the other hand, we are not so sure whether they are *ill-mannered, ill-tempered, neglectful, selfish, unfair, unkind,* or *vindictive* (high situational locus, low desirability terms). Nor are we certain whether they are *cheerful, good-humored, good-natured, good-tempered, humane, truthful, fair-minded,* or even *rational* (high situational locus, high desirability terms).

Situational Attribution, Neutrality, or Uncertainty?

The complex relationship between situational responses and neutrality can be further illuminated by examining two other item indexes: (a) endorsement (END), the proportion of 2 responses for each term, based solely on those subjects who gave either a 0 or a 2

Table 6
Predicting the Tendency of a Term to Elicit Situational Responses: Correlations and Multiple Correlations for Descriptions of Each of the Four Targets in the Three Pools

Target	Item pool	Correlation with situational responses: Word difficulty	Correlation with situational responses: Social desirability ratings: *M*	Correlation with situational responses: Social desirability ratings: Extremeness	Multiple correlation: Desirability *M* and extremeness
Self	2,800	.06	.47	−.45	.60
	1,666	.05	.40	−.42	.57
	731	.09	.32	−.46	.57
Well-liked other	2,800	.09	.50	−.55	.68
	1,666	.06	.43	−.53	.66
	731	.10	.37	−.55	.68
Neutral other	2,800	.03	.47	−.14	
	1,666	.03	.45	−.05	
	731	.06	.52	.00	
Disliked other	2,800	.13	.18	.04	
	1,666	.03	.16	.17	
	731	.01	.27	.21	
Intercorrelations among predictors					
Word difficulty	2,800		−.06	−.29	
	1,666		−.03	−.23	
	731		−.07	−.29	
Desirability *M*	2,800			−.20	
	1,666			−.07	
	731			.05	
M	2,800	10.38	4.43	3.42	
	1,666	2.63	4.65	3.79	
	731	2.46	4.98	4.43	
σ	2,800	17.31	1.76	3.01	
	1,666	4.91	1.92	3.10	
	731	5.11	2.11	3.30	

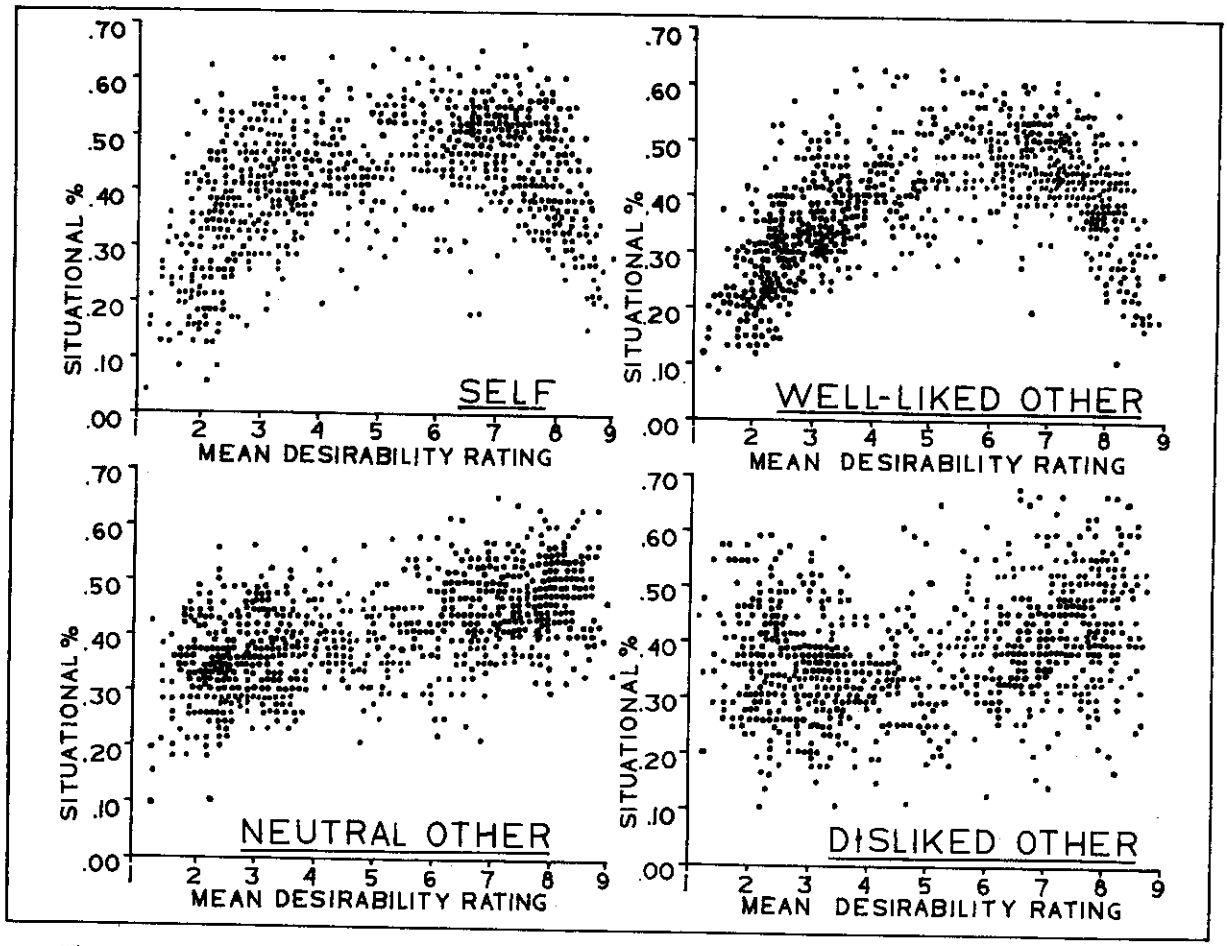

Figure 1. Relationship between the proportion of situational responses elicited by a term and its social desirability. (Scatterplots based on 731 terms for descriptions of each of the 4 targets.)

response; and (b) imbalance (IMBAL), the squared difference between END and 50%. The endorsement proportions are algebraically independent of the situational response proportions; they indicate the extent to which subjects agree that a term *is*—as opposed to *is not*—an accurate description of the target. The imbalance index, which is also computationally independent of the situational responses, reflects "attributional extremeness"—the degree of consensus on one (either) of the two types of attributions on the part of those who made an attribution. The intercorrelations among these two indexes, plus the social desirability mean and extremeness values, and the situational proportions—for descriptions of each of the four targets—are presented in Table 7. These correlations are based on the 1,666-term pool; results from the other two pools of terms are quite similar.

While IMBAL is computationally independent of the proportion of subjects selecting the situational response, the two indexes are clearly linked empirically. Indeed, as Tables 6 and 7 indicate, IMBAL is the best single predictor of the situational proportions for all four targets. When IMBAL is included in stepwise multiple regression analyses to predict the situational response proportions, it is the first variable selected, and none of the other variables adds any appreciable increment to the multiple correlations. These results demonstrate that use of the situational response option is highly related to response balance among those who eschew the situational option. Extreme terms—defined as those for which there is high consensus on whether the term is (or is not) descriptive—tend to elicit relatively few situational responses. Conversely, more balanced terms—those for which as many individuals consider the term to be an *accurate* description of the target as those who consider it to be an *inaccurate* description—tend to elicit the most

Table 7
Predicting the Tendency of a Term to Elicit Situational Responses: Correlations Among Five Indexes for Descriptions of Each of the Four Targets in the 1,666 Pool

Index	Target	END	EXT	IMBAL	Situational %
Desirability *M*	Self	.89	−.07	−.34	.40
	Other(+)	.93	−.07	−.41	.43
	Other(N)	.71	−.07	−.47	.45
	Other(−)	−.36	−.07	.15	.16
Response endorsement (END)	Self		.08	−.31	.39
	Other(+)		.08	−.35	.38
	Other(N)		.06	−.64	.54
	Other(−)		.11	−.45	.20
Desirability extremeness (EXT)	Self			.60	−.42
	Other(+)			.67	−.53
	Other(N)			.28	−.05
	Other(−)			−.01	.17
Response imbalance (IMBAL)	Self				−.64
	Other(+)				−.69
	Other(N)				−.58
	Other(−)				−.44
M	Self	.36	3.79	.12	.42
	Other(+)	.36	3.79	.12	.33
	Other(N)	.33	3.79	.07	.40
	Other(−)	.42	3.79	.05	.33

Note. All correlations ≥.05 and ≥.07 differ significantly from zero at the .05 and .01 levels, respectively. + = well-liked; N = neutral; − = disliked.

situational responses. Stated another way, the amount of disagreement or controversiality among those who use one of the attributional responses is highly related to the number of individuals who elect the nonattributional or situational option.

How can this strong relationship be explained? To answer this question, it will be useful to query the psychometric literature for *known* correlates of attributional controversiality, or as it is referred to in that literature, of "interindividual response variability." Decades of psychometric research have demonstrated that interindividual controversiality is highly related to response instability or intraindividual variability over time (e.g., Fiske, 1957; Mitra & Fiske, 1956). Stimuli (e.g., test items, survey questions) which elicit disparate meanings among a sample of persons will typically also elicit unstable meanings for the average individual over repeated exposures to those stimuli. Moreover, intraindividual response instability has been shown to be highly related to initial response uncertainty, as measured by such diverse indexes as response latency and the use of a "?" response option (e.g., Dodd & Svalastoga, 1952; Goldberg, 1968). The psychometric concept linking these processes is that of *interpretive ambiguity*. For a review of studies showing these effects and a theoretical explanation of the ambiguity concept, see Goldberg (1963).

In the present context, these results suggest that the use of the situational response option is likely to be confounded with response ambiguity and/or uncertainty on the part of the respondent. Unfortunately, in these as in previous attribution studies based on self-reports, no independent measures of response uncertainty were collected.[2] As a consequence,

[2] The only independent index of interpretive ambiguity that is available in any of the present studies is the variance of the social desirability ratings collected by Norman (Study 1). However, the prediction that a term's tendency to elicit situational responses is related to its ambiguity, as reflected in the dispersions of the desirability ratings, was only weakly

Table 8
Generality of a Subject's—and of a Term's—Propensity for Using—and for Eliciting—Situational Responses: Intercorrelations Among the Situational Proportions for the Four Targets from Study 1

Target	Target: Self	Other (+)	Other (N)	Other (−)
Self	—	.67	.46	.28
Other(+)	.84	—	.41	.27
Other(N)	.54	.49	—	.30
Other(−)	.18	.15	.47	—

Note. The correlations above the main diagonal illustrate the effects of situational attribution as a response set; these correlations, based on the proportions of situational responses employed by each subject, are the mean values across the 14 samples of 100 subjects, each of which was administered a different set of 200 terms. The correlations below the main diagonal illustrate the generality of a term's propensity for eliciting situational responses; these correlations are based on the pool of 1,666 terms. All of the correlations are significantly different from zero at $p < .01$. + = well-liked; N = neutral; − = disliked.

it is as yet impossible to determine from these self-report studies the extent to which a given "situational" response reflects (a) a middle (or neutral) position of the target on the attribute continuum, (b) response uncertainty and/or stimulus ambiguity, or (c) a genuine situational attribution.

Situational Attributions and Response Bias

Indeed, individual differences in avoidance of the situational response option and individual differences in extremeness response bias are here, as in Nisbett et al. (1973), inextricably confounded. Table 8 presents some evidence on the consistency of individual differences in the use of the situational response across the four targets, that is, whether subjects' use of the situational option can be viewed as a response set. The correlations were obtained among the proportions of situational responses to the four targets used by each of the 100 subjects in Study 1 who were administered a particular set of 200 terms, for each of the 14 samples of subjects. The correlations listed above the main diagonal in Table 8 are the means of these 14 sets of values. These mean correlations are all positive and significantly different from zero, thus indicating some consistency among subjects in their propensities for using the situational option. Indeed, individual differences in the subjects' use of the situational response for self-description and for describing a well-liked other were quite highly related ($r = .67$).

Correspondingly, the tendency of a *term* to elicit a middle and a situational response is also confounded. The correlations presented below the main diagonal in Table 8 are focused on *terms* rather than on subjects. The proportion of subjects electing the situational option for each term was computed, and the correlations of these values among the targets were calculated within each of the three pools of terms. The correlations based on the 1,666-term pool are displayed below the main diagonal in Table 8; results based on the other two pools of terms are quite similar.

The propensity of a term to elicit the situational response option is at least somewhat consistent across targets, and these generality correlations are about .85 between descriptions of oneself and a well-liked other. Specifically, as exemplified in Figure 1, in descriptions of oneself or someone one likes, one generally attributes highly desirable traits (e.g., *trustworthy*) and denies highly negative ones (e.g., *dishonest*); thus, for extreme traits the average response is typically a nonsituational one. For more neutral traits, on the other hand, the average attribution will more likely tend to correspond with the situational response.

Study 3

Situational Responses Versus Neutrality: Some Further Data

Method

Study 2 differed from Study 1 in a number of ways, including (a) the subject samples (the law school students in Study 2 were probably of higher average

confirmed; correlations between situational responses and ambiguity in the .20 to .30 range for descriptions of oneself and well-liked others were near zero for descriptions of neutral and disliked others.

verbal fluency than the college undergraduates in Study 1) and (b) the particular phrasing of the situational response options ("The word is only partly or occasionally descriptive" vs. "The word is only occasionally descriptive—in other words, if it depends on the situation"). To discover the extent to which the relationship between situational attribution and response imbalance may be influenced by either of these two factors, 77 University of Oregon undergraduates, all of whom had indicated that they were quite familiar with the television personalities employed as targets, described themselves, Walter Cronkite, Howard Cosell, and Barbara Walters, using the same 60 terms employed in Study 2. Of the 77 subjects, 38 received forms in which the situational option was phrased, "Use a 1 if the word is only occasionally descriptive—in other words, if it depends on the situation" (*depends* instructions); for the remaining 39 subjects, the situational option was phrased, "Use a 1 if the word is only occasionally descriptive" (*occasionally* instructions). The 0 and 2 response options were identical to those used in the other two studies.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the situational response proportions for the 60 terms, under the two instructional conditions, are presented in Table 9. While the *depends* instructions elicited about 5% more situational responses than did the *occasionally* instructions for each of the four targets, the general effect hypothesized by Nisbett et al. (1973) and confirmed in both previous studies in this series was now strikingly reconfirmed with *both* sets of instructions. On the average, self-descriptions elicited considerably more situational responses (49% and 44% in the two instructional conditions) than did descriptions of Walter Cronkite (34% and 30%) and somewhat more than descriptions of either Howard Cosell (38% and 35%) or Barbara Walters (43% and 36%). Moreover, the correlations between the situational response proportions in the two conditions ranged from .75 to nearly .90. An analysis of variance of these situational proportions, with instructional condition as one independent variable and target (a repeated measure) as another, indicated a highly significant ($p < .001$) main effect for target, a nonsignificant effect for instructional condition ($p = .07$), and no hint of any Target × Condition interaction ($F < 1$).

Moreover, as Table 9 indicates, the situational proportions were substantially related to the index of response imbalance under *both*

Table 9
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Situational Response Proportions for Descriptions of Four Targets Under Two Instructional Conditions

	Instruction								
	Depends				Occasionally				
Target	Self	Barbara Walters	Howard Cosell	Walter Cronkite	Self	Barbara Walters	Howard Cosell	Walter Cronkite	Response imbalance
Depends									
Self	—	.04	−.02	.06	.75**	.15	−.03	.06	−.62**
Barbara Walters		—	.57**	.56**	−.06	.81**	.63*	.61**	−.59**
Howard Cosell			—	.17	−.06	.42**	.76**	.22	−.68**
Walter Cronkite				—	.09	.69**	.26*	.89**	−.74**
Occasionally									
Self					—	.18	−.14	.11	−.74**
Barbara Walters						—	.53**	.78**	−.70**
Howard Cosell							—	.32*	−.59**
Walter Cronkite								—	−.76**
M	.49	.43	.38	.34	.44	.36	.35	.30	
σ	.16	.18	.14	.16	.15	.17	.15	.16	

Note. $N = 60$ terms. Correlations between the situational response proportions in the two conditions are in boldface.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 10
Average Proportions of Situational Responses Elicited by the 55 Common Terms to Each of 14 Targets from the Three Studies

Rank	Average situational proportion	Target	Student sample	Instructions
1	.48	Self	Oregon	Occasionally–Depends
2	.47	Self	Law school	Occasionally–Depends
3	.45	Self	Michigan	Occasionally or partly
4	.43	Self	Oregon	Occasionally
5	.43	Walters	Oregon	Occasionally–Depends
6	.43	Other(N)	Michigan	Occasionally or partly
7	.40	Other(+)	Law school	Occasionally–Depends
8	.37	Cosell	Oregon	Occasionally–Depends
9	.36	Walters	Oregon	Occasionally
10	.36	Other(+)	Michigan	Occasionally or partly
11	.35	Cosell	Oregon	Occasionally
12	.34	Cronkite	Oregon	Occasionally–Depends
13	.33	Other(−)	Michigan	Occasionally or partly
14	.30	Cronkite	Oregon	Occasionally

Note. N = neutral; + = well liked; − = disliked. Oregon and Michigan students were all undergraduates.

instructional conditions. Across all four targets, the average correlation between situationality and imbalance was −.66 for the *depends* instructions and −.70 for the *occasionally* instructions. For the same set of 60 terms, the corresponding correlations from Study 2 were −.65 for self-descriptions and −.66 for descriptions of another. Clearly, then, the link between situational attribution and response balance is not limited to a particular type of target, a particular sample of subjects, or a particular set of instructions.

Table 10 presents the average situational response proportions elicited by the 55 terms common to all three studies, for each of the targets that were used. This table permits a rough analysis of the differential impact on the situational proportions of three factors: (a) the type of target, (b) the sample of subjects, and (c) the nature of the situational response option. The largest differences stem from the type of target described (self vs. all others, especially Walter Cronkite and both well-liked and disliked peers), regardless of the sample or the type of instructions. The smallest differences stem from the particular form of the situational response option, especially whether it is phrased "occasionally descriptive" or "occasionally or partly descriptive."

Discussion

It is reassuring to discover that an engaging theoretical hypothesis framed in the early 1970s has been clearly confirmed with data collected for a vastly different purpose almost a decade earlier. As a consequence, the attribution hypothesis—that individuals tend to use the situational response more often when describing themselves than when describing others—is now difficult to explain away as an artifact due to the "demand characteristics" (Orne, 1962) of the experimental task. Moreover, the comprehensive nature of Norman's (Note 1) initial pool of terms rules out as an explanation any fortuitous sampling of the domain of trait descriptors, since 92% of the entire pool of English trait terms produced the hypothesized effect.

When that 8% of the terms that did not elicit the effect was here sampled for a replication study (Study 2), the results were not unequivocal: While it *may* be possible to find a small subset of terms that reverse the situational attribution effect, as might be hypothesized by Monson and Snyder (1977), further studies of such anomalous terms are clearly needed. Moreover, additional research should focus on the attributes of the minority of persons (around 15% in Study 1) who do not

produce the general effect. Of the 1,400 subjects employed by Norman, individual differences in Δ values ranged from −.24 to +.44, in a roughly normal distribution. While Δ was unrelated to the sex of the subject (the only nontest index of individual differences available in Norman's sample), it is possible that other characteristics are related.

In exploring such individual differences, however, it is important to keep distinct two separate processes: (a) differences among subjects in their *general* use of the situational response (i.e., a dispositional versus situational response set) and (b) individual differences in Δ (the extent to which subjects attribute different degrees of situationality to themselves as compared to well-liked others, independently of their general propensities for responding situationally). The first process, situationality set (see McGee & Snyder, 1975), is here confounded with individual differences in extremeness response style, the correlates of which have been well summarized by Hamilton (1968). The second process, that of differential situational attribution, is a fresh construct that grows directly out of current research on attributional processes, and consequently, there is as yet no evidence of its reliability and/or generality, much less its personality correlates.

Past studies within the attributional framework have generally neglected two potentially important factors in the attribution process: (a) the evaluations of the target others by the attributors and (b) the attributors' evaluations of themselves (self-esteem). The results of the present study, when coupled with those from Nisbett et al. (1973), suggest that both positively and negatively evaluated others are described more dispositionally than neutral others, who in turn are described in a slightly more dispositional fashion than oneself.

Since attributions of others appear to become more dispositional to the extent that the targets are more evaluatively polarized (either admired or disliked), much the same process may underlie the self-descriptions of individuals who differ in self-esteem. Studies of extremeness response style (Hamilton, 1968) have found that "adjustment" is negatively related to extremity bias, thus suggesting that self-esteem may be positively related to situational responses. On the other hand, if evaluation influences situationality bias similarly for descriptions of oneself and descriptions of others, then persons of more "neutral" self-esteem should describe themselves most situationally, whereas those with more polarized self-concepts (either positive or negative) should describe themselves more dispositionally. While it may be difficult to locate individuals of genuinely negative self-esteem outside of clinical settings, in the more natural (and more limited) range from neutral to highly positive self-esteem, there are thus two discordant predictions: a positive relationship between self-esteem and situational attribution (the prediction generated from the extremeness literature) versus a negative relationship (the prediction generated from the attribution literature). An empirical test of these two competing hypotheses might help to articulate these previously unrelated bodies of knowledge.

Finally, while the results of this study were all framed in terms of situational responses (vs. dispositional responses), they could as easily have been cast in terms of cautiousness (vs. extremity) or of uncertainty or ambiguity (vs. certainty or clarity), since the situational response is typically the middle, neutral, or uncertain response, other things being equal. Thus, the theoretical basis for the relationships displayed in Figure 1 between situational responses and desirability (curvilinear for descriptions of oneself and well-liked others, monotonic for neutral others, and weak for disliked others) becomes clear only when the situational response is viewed as an amalgam of inconsistency, neutrality, and uncertainty. Future research should be directed at the confluence of these logically interrelated constructs.

Conclusions

The results presented by Nisbett et al. (1973)—that individuals tend to use the situational response option more often when describing themselves than others—has been clearly confirmed, using virtually all English trait-descriptive adjectives and differing varieties of rating formats. Specifically, the situa-

tional response is used most often when describing oneself, somewhat less often when describing a neutral other, and least often when describing either a well-liked or a disliked other.

This effect, though small, is remarkably consistent: Over 92% of the 2,800 trait adjectives showed the general effect. As a consequence, it may be quite difficult to find a subset of trait terms which, by consistently showing the reverse effect, could thereby serve to verify the interaction hypothesis of Monson and Snyder (1977).

However, the self-report procedures used in this study and its predecessors do not provide clear evidence regarding the situational versus dispositional locus of attributions to oneself and others, since the situational response is also the middle, neutral, average, uncertain, and ambiguous response, other things being equal.

As a consequence, future research must be directed at unconfounding these typically confounded alternative types of response processes. In the interim, these self-report procedures should not be used as indicators of basic attributional processes.

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