Perceived Behavioral Consistency Underlying Trait Attributions to Oneself and Another:
An Extension of the Actor-Observer Effect

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This psychometric study was designed to investigate the hypothesis that people perceive themselves as more variable than others, even when they judge themselves and the other person identically on a trait-rating scale. Using one of two different types of rating formats, subjects described themselves and a person of the same sex and approximate age whom they knew well and liked. Both persons were rated on each of 60 trait-descriptive adjectives, with a scale ranging from –3 to +3, plus four middle response options (average, depends on the situation, don't know, term unclear). After each of their trait ratings, subjects assessed the consistency of the person's behaviors associated with that trait. Analyses revealed a highly uniform pattern of self/other differences in the predicted direction: For 72% of the 60 traits, the majority of the subjects described themselves as more variable than the other person.

Interlocutor: Would you describe (Jane/yourself) as "friendly," "unfriendly," or "it depends on the situation?"

Averageperson: Jane is friendly. With me, it depends on the situation.

Interlocutor: Would you describe (Jane/yourself), then, as "extremely," "quite," or "slightly" friendly.

Averageperson: Jane is nearly always quite friendly. In some situations I am at best only slightly friendly, whereas in other situations I am very friendly, so I guess that overall I am quite friendly too.

This study provides some verification for a theoretical conjecture by Goldberg (1981), who hypothesized that even when individuals attribute the

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same degree of a characteristic to themselves as to another person, they may do so for different reasons. Specifically, it was suggested that a dispositional attribution of the same intensity of extremity for both persons (e.g., *quite* friendly) will reflect more variability around that modal value in perceptions of oneself than in perception or others. In such a case, consideration of the dispositional attribution alone could be misleading, because it might induce investigators to assume that there is no difference in the two perceptions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perhaps the most fertile hypothesis in the burgeoning field of causal attribution was initially framed by Jones and Nisbett (1972) as follows: "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" (p. 80). Over the subsequent 15 years, this "actor-observer" hypothesis has been investigated intensively; for reviews see Jones (1976), Kelley and Michela (1980), Nisbett and Ross (1980), and Watson (1982). The literature has rather consistently revealed a propensity for individuals to explain their own behaviors in a more situational manner ("I failed the exam because I was not feeling well that day"), but to explain the behaviors of others in more dispositional terms ("Jane failed the exam because she is not very smart").

Why is this effect so common? The most parsimonious explanation is a purely informational one: Individuals have more information about their own behaviors than about those of any other person. Specifically, individuals can observe their own behaviors across longer intervals of time and across more occasions than they can observe the behaviors of any other person. Of even greater importance, individuals can observe their own behaviors in a far wider variety of situations than they can observe another's, if for no other reason than that their presence is a constant factor in those situations in which they have observed others. Therefore, to the extent that behavioral patterns are moderated by situational features, one can hardly help but be impressed by the seeming consistency of others' behaviors when compared with the known variability that one has observed in one's own behaviors.

THE SELF-OTHER OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE ACTOR-OBSERVER EFFECT

In a seminal study, Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Marecek (1973) asked subjects to describe themselves and various others using 20 antonym pairs and a middle response option labeled, "It depends on the situation"; subjects used this middle option more frequently when describing themselves than when describing any of the other targets. Later, Goldberg (1978) analyzed a comprehensive set of 2,800 trait-descriptive terms, subsets of which had been administered to 14

samples of 100 subjects (half of each sex). These subjects used a three-category rating scale to describe themselves and three other people whom they knew well—one person whom they liked, one toward whom they felt neutral, and one whom they disliked. Results revealed a strong tendency for subjects to use the middle response option more often when describing themselves than any of the others, with over 92% of all trait terms and 85% of all subjects showing the effect.

However, Goldberg (1978) concluded that subjects may use a middle response option more frequently for themselves than for others, not necessarily because it describes them perfectly, but because it is more acurate than either of the two dispositional options. He suggested that a middle response might have any of four meanings: (1) The person is average, middle, or neutral on that trait, (2) it depends on the situation, (3) one does not know the target that well or in that way, and (4) the meaning of the term is ambiguous or unclear. Goldberg (1981) employed a more differentiated response format designed to unconfound these four types of explanations for a middle response. In the first of a series of four studies, subjects described themselves and each of 12 types of others on 60 trait terms, using the following rating scale:

0 = Not accurate as a description.
A = Average or middle.
B = It depends on the situation.
C = I'm uncertain; I just don't know [myself/the person] that well.
D = The meaning of the term is unclear.
1 = Accurate as a description.

The degree of target familiarity affected subjects' use of the situational option, with more familiar targets eliciting more frequent situational responses. However, even though subjects were provided with an unconfounded response scale, the self-other attribution effect again appeared: The "depends on the situation" option elicited 10% more frequent responses in self than in other descriptions.

The response scale used in Study 1 of Goldberg (1981) contained more middle response options (four) than dispositional options (two), and Goldberg hypothesized that differential use of the situational response option might be attenuated if subjects were able to make finer distinctions on a dispositional scale. In Studies 3 and 4 of Goldberg (1981), subjects rated themselves, as well as another person of the same sex and approximate age whom they knew well and liked, on each of 587 trait terms. Subjects used a response format that consisted of the four middle options employed in Study 1, plus a dispositional scale that ranged from -3 to +3. Using this multistep rating format, self-other differences in the use of the situational option disappeared.

How could one reconcile this finding with the extensive evidence of actor-observer differences based on a wide variety of methodologies? The most direct explanation is that people easily aggregate diverse behavioral acts so as to produce a modal trait value, but that this modal value conveys no direct

information about the perceived variability of the relevant acts. Consider the average caloric intake of two individuals of the same sex, height, and weight, one of whom is a binge eater and the other of whom eats on a regular schedule; although both individuals may have the same mean caloric intake, they clearly differ in their variability about the mean. Or, consider the "punctuality" of someone who typically arrives early to appointments but sometimes arrives hours late. Is that individual more, or less, punctual than someone who *always* arrives 10 minutes late? In aggregating across occasions, both individuals might be considered to be punctual to the same degree; yet clearly one is much more variable than the other.

Specifically, we may attribute the same intensity of a characteristic to ourselves as to another, yet still believe that our behaviors are more variable across situations than are those of others. The present study was designed to investigate this hypothesis.

METHOD

Trait Terms

The 60 trait-descriptive adjectives used by Goldberg (1981) were employed in this study; these terms as listed here in Table 3. This set of 60 terms elicited the same self-other response pattern as a more comprehensive set of 587 terms used in Studies 3 and 4 of Goldberg (1981; see Table 15 of that report).

Subjects

Undergraduate students (N = 154) received extra course credit in exchange for their participation in this study. Of these 154 subjects, 76 were randomly assigned to the accuracy condition and 78 to the intensity condition.

General Procedures Common to Both Conditions

Subjects used the 60 trait terms to describe both themselves and someone of the same sex and approximate age whom they knew well and liked. Half of the subjects in each condition described themselves first. For each of the 60 terms, the subjects made two consecutive judgments: First, they rated the target on a multistep rating scale with response values ranging from –3 to +3, plus the following four middle response options:

A = Average or middle.
B = It depends on the situation.
C = I just don't know.
D = The meaning of the term is unclear.

Second, those subjects who had provided a numerical rating for that trait were instructed to select one of two possible explanations for their initial rating:

X = I am [the person is] pretty consistently at that level.
Y = At times I am [the person is] more extreme than that level and at other times less extreme; thus the rating is an average of the two extremes.

TABLE 1 The Proportion of the Total Responses (across all subjects and all 60 terms) Elicited by Each of the Response Options in Each of the Two Conditions

Response Option	*Accuracy Scale (N = 76)*			*Intensity Scale (N = 78)*			*Mean*
	Self	*Other*	*S-O*	*Self*	*Other*	*S-O*	*S-O*
			Step 1				
Don't know (C)	.01	.03	–.02	.02	.04	–.02	–.020
Term unclear (D)	.04	.05	–.01	.05	.04	.01	.000
Average (A)	.09	.08	.01	.08	.10	–.02	–.005
Depends on situation (B)	.10	.07	.03	.11	.09	.02	.025
+3	.08	.10	–.02	.08	.09	–.01	–.015
+2	.22	.21	.01	.20	.19	.01	.010
+1	.20	.17	.03	.21	.17	.04	.035
–1	.10	.11	–.01	.11	.11	.00	–.005
–2	.11	.13	–.02	.10	.11	–.01	–.015
–3	.05	.06	–.01	.05	.07	–.02	–.015
			Step 2				
Consistency (X)	.66	.72	–.06	.70	.74	–.04	–.050
Variability (Y)	.34	.28	.06	.30	.26	.04	.050

The Two Experimental Conditions

Two response formats were used for obtaining the initial trait ratings. Subjects in the accuracy condition used the following rating scale:

–3 = extremely *inaccurate* as a description
–2 = quite *inaccurate* as a description
–1 = slightly *inaccurate* as a description
+1 = slightly *accurate* as a description
+2 = quite *accurate* as a description
+3 = extremely *accurate* as a description

Subjects in the intensity condition used the following rating scale:

–3 = extremely *unlike* me [the person]
–2 = quite *unlike* me [the person]
–1 = slightly *unlike* me [the person]
+1 = slightly *like* me [the person]
+2 = Quite *like* me [the person]
+3 = extremely *like* me [the person]

RESULTS

Table 1 provides a summary of our findings.[1] Listed in this table are the proportions of responses elicited by each of the response options within both steps of the descriptive process. Exactly mirroring the findings of Goldberg (1981, Table 19), we found no reliable differences between the self and other ratings for the average (A) and term unclear (D) response options; moreover, there was again a statistically significant difference for the don't know (C) option, with others eliciting more frequent responses of this type. In contrast to our previous findings, however, the depends on the situation (B) option here elicited significantly more responses in the descriptions of oneself than of others. More important, self-other differences in the proportions of responses to the consistency and variability response options were in the direction concordant with our hypothesis and were highly significant ($p < .001$) in each of the two conditions; specifically, the consistency option was used more frequently for describing others and the variability option was used more frequently for describing oneself.

Table 2 provides a more detailed analysis of these findings. Listed in the table are the proportions of responses to the consistency option for *each* numerical value of the dispositional rating scale, both within and across conditions. (The corresponding response proportions for the variability option are always equal to one minus the value for the consistency option.) As we had hypothesized, subjects attributed significantly ($p < .01$) more consistency to others than to themselves (and thus more variability to their own behaviors than to those of others) for every one of the scale values except the two extremes (+3 and -3). In the latter case, virtually all (88%) of the ratings were associated with the use of the consistency option, as one would expect from a logical analysis of the meaning of an attribution of such dispositional extremity. (In contrast, 74% of the 2 and 58% of the 1 responses were associated with the consistency option, indicating how perceptions of behavioral consistency versus variability influence the selection of trait ratings.)

Overall, 72% of the 60 terms elicited self-other differences in the direction concordant with our hypothesis ($p < .001$ by the sign test). Traits eliciting the largest self-other differences in the expected direction were selfish (+23% difference between the two proportions), fidgety (+21%), brilliant (+17%), and self-satisfied (+16%); those eliciting the largest differences in the opposite direction were self-examining (-9%), aloof (-7%), and peaceful (-5%).

Finally, those traits that most strongly elicited the consistency option differed systematically from those that most strongly elicited the variability option, regardless of the target being described; the correlations of the variability response proportions between the self and other ratings across the 60 terms were .45 ($p < .001$) in the intensity and .30 ($p < .05$) in the accuracy conditions; when averaged across both conditions, the correlation was .53 ($p < .001$). Table 3 presents the proportion of responses to the variability option

TABLE 2 Consistency Response Proportions as a Functionof Scale Value in Each of the Two Conditions

	Accuracy Scale (N = 76)			*Intensity Scale (N = 78)*			*Both Conditions (N = 154)*		
Scale Value	*Self*	*Other*	*S-O*	*Self*	*Other*	*S-O*	*Self*	*Other*	*S-O*
+3	.84	.87	−.03	.89	.90	−.01	.87	.88	−.01
+2	.73	.73	.00	.73	.78	−.05	.73	.76	−.03
+1	.54	.59	−.05	.62	.68	−.06	.58	.63	−.05
−1	.47	.59	−.12	.57	.58	−.01	.53	.59	−.06
−2	.69	.75	−.06	.73	.74	−.01	.71	.75	−.04
−3	.87	.93	−.06	.92	.85	.07	.89	.89	.00
Total	.66	.72	−.06	.70	.74	−.04	.68	.73	−.05

Note: The corresponding response proportions for the variability option are always equal to 1.00 minus the value for the consistency option.

elicited by each of the 60 traits, rank-ordered by the average of the self and other ratings. In general, those terms that most strongly elicited the variability option refer to temporary "states" (e.g., angry), whereas those that elicited the consistency option refer to stable "traits" (e.g., moral).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer unambiguous evidence to substantiate the hypothesis that, when making personality trait ratings, an individual will ascribe more consistency in behavioral manifestations to others, and thus more variability to his or her own behaviors. As Table 1 reveals, the Step 2 options produced 5% differences between self and other targets in the hypothesized direction. Although the size of this difference may not seem overwhelming, its import is revealed when its size is compared with the proportions of responses to all of the other response options. Indeed, the consistency effect was twice the size of the effect elicited by the response option previously used to document the actor-observer attribution effect ("it depends on the situation"), and twice the size of the effect elicited by the option reflecting familiarity and knowledge ("I don't know the target that well").

Most important, the finding that subjects attribute more consistency to others than to themselves was replicated for all levels of the dispositional rating scale except the two extremes. Finally, the analyses of the 60 individual traits revealed that the vast majority of them also elicited responses concordant with the hypothesis. In general, then, we may safely conclude that, even when individuals appear to make the same dispositional attribution for themselves as for another, they may still perceive substantial differences in behavioral consistency between themselves and others.

TABLE 3 Variability Response Proportions as a Function of the Trait

	Accuracy (N = 76)			*Intensity (N = 78)*			*Both Combined (N = 154)*		
Trait	*Self*	*Other*	*Mean*	*Self*	*Other*	*Mean*	*Self*	*Other*	*Mean*
Angry	.48	.38	.43	.50	.47	.48	.49	.43	.46
Sarcastic	.54	.36	.45	.42	.32	.37	.48	.34	.41
Impulsive	.45	.28	.36	.46	.39	.42	.46	.34	.40
Vibrant	.36	.40	.38	.45	.27	.36	.40	.34	.37
Serious	.34	.37	.36	.39	.37	.38	.36	.37	.37
Emotional	.44	.36	.40	.33	.33	.33	.38	.34	.36
Self-satisfied	.51	.21	.36	.38	.36	.37	.44	.28	.36
Impatient	.42	.28	.35	.38	.38	.38	.40	.33	.36
Brave	.40	.43	.42	.34	.25	.30	.37	.34	.36
Ill-tempered	.42	.27	.34	.33	.37	.35	.38	.32	.35
Absent-minded	.42	.35	.38	.35	.26	.30	.38	.30	.34
Brilliant	.32	.26	.29	.54	.26	.40	.43	.26	.34
Inconsistent	.38	.25	.32	.41	.29	.35	.40	.27	.33
Patient	.46	.33	.40	.32	.22	.27	.39	.28	.33
Overstudious	.36	.28	.32	.36	.33	.34	.36	.31	.33
Forward	.41	.25	.33	.34	.30	.32	.38	.28	.33
Deliberate	.47	.39	.43	.17	.26	.22	.32	.32	.32
Particular	.47	.23	.35	.30	.26	.28	.38	.24	.32
Timid	.39	.36	.38	.27	.25	.26	.33	.30	.32
Happy	.37	.28	.32	.37	.25	.31	.37	.26	.32
Sophisticated	.34	.27	.30	.34	.31	.32	.34	.29	.32
Aloof	.29	.46	.38	.26	.23	.24	.28	.34	.31
Sentimental	.34	.30	.32	.27	.34	.30	.30	.32	.31
Verbal	.44	.33	.38	.23	.23	.23	.34	.28	.31
Innovative	.40	.29	.34	.31	.23	.27	.36	.26	.31
Passive	.33	.29	.31	.35	.26	.30	.34	.28	.31
Imitative	.40	.27	.34	.33	.23	.28	.36	.25	.31
Conceitless	.38	.33	.36	.26	.24	.25	.32	.28	.30
Boastful	.33	.30	.32	.35	.24	.30	.34	.27	.30
Narrow-minded	.38	.24	.31	.20	.39	.30	.29	.32	.30
Benevolent	.32	.24	.28	.38	.26	.32	.35	.25	.30
Industrious	.34	.33	.34	.29	.22	.26	.32	.28	.30
Weak	.37	.27	.32	.27	.26	.26	.32	.26	.29
Soft-hearted	.32	.37	.34	.33	.15	.24	.32	.26	.29
Selfish	.50	.19	.34	.31	.16	.24	.40	.18	.29
Miserly	.34	.21	.28	.33	.29	.31	.34	.25	.29
Disorganized	.28	.31	.30	.27	.28	.28	.28	.30	.28
Informative	.31	.33	.32	.25	.24	.24	.28	.28	.28
Practical	.28	.33	.30	.26	.24	.25	.27	.28	.28
Fidgety	.33	.15	.24	.42	.18	.30	.38	.16	.27
Open-minded	.32	.28	.30	.25	.24	.24	.28	.26	.27
Self-critical	.29	.21	.25	.30	.27	.28	.30	.24	.27
Undependable	.25	.17	.21	.26	.38	.32	.26	.28	.27
Peaceful	.24	.35	.30	.22	.21	.22	.23	.28	.26
Uninquisitive	.37	.20	.28	.26	.17	.22	.32	.18	.25
Strong	.22	.27	.24	.27	.23	.25	.24	.25	.25
Unpretentious	.33	.28	.30	.24	.14	.19	.28	.21	.25
Active	.24	.28	.26	.26	.20	.23	.25	.24	.24
Eager	.25	.23	.24	.19	.30	.24	.22	.26	.24
Inner-directed	.22	.25	.24	.25	.22	.24	.24	.24	.24
Earthy	.20	.24	.22	.22	.27	.24	.21	.26	.23
Curious	.30	.28	.29	.20	.15	.18	.25	.22	.23
Unintellectual	.29	.22	.26	.25	.15	.20	.27	.18	.23
Sensitive	.19	.32	.26	.24	.15	.20	.22	.24	.23
Shortsighted	.28	.21	.24	.21	.18	.20	.24	.20	.22
Self-examining	.20	.28	.24	.16	.26	.21	.18	.27	.22
Pleasant	.19	.28	.24	.25	.14	.20	.22	.21	.22
Warm	.23	.23	.23	.15	.17	.16	.19	.20	.20
Reliable	.21	.11	.16	.12	.21	.16	.16	.16	.16
Moral	.12	.15	.14	.22	.16	.19	.17	.16	.16

Note: The traits are ordered by the mean variability response proportions averaged across the two types of targets and both conditions. The corresponding response proportions for the consistency option are always equal to 1.00 minus the tabled value.

To the best of our knowledge, Kammer (1982) is the only other investigator to have assessed directly the hypothesis suggested by Goldberg (1981). In her study, 56 German undergraduates described themselves and a close friend of the same sex using 20 trait terms that had been selected randomly from one pole or the other of each of the 20 antonym pairs used by Nisbett et al. (1973). Half of the subjects described themselves first. Subjects used two scales: (1) In general, how *X* are you [your friend]? (2) How much do you [does your friend] vary from one situation to another in how *X* you are [he/she is]? Seven-step rating scales, ranging from 1, *not at all* to 7, *extremely*, were used for both questions. Her variability question succeeded in unearthing the actor-observer attribution effect: "Actors judged their own behaviors as more variable across situations than their friends' behaviors ($t = 3.03$, $df = 51$, $p < .01$)." The relevant means for this question, based on her independent samples (first administration forms only), were 4.28 ($SD = .93$) for the self ratings and 3.61 ($SD = .65$) for the other ratings.

Indeed, the current investigators inadvertently discovered yet another method for producing this attribution effect. In a pilot study, 48 subjects used a set of 39 bipolar rating scales to describe themselves and someone of the same sex and approximate age whom they knew well and liked. The rating scales

ranged from –3 (*extremely A*) to +3 (*extremely B*), with three middle responses (average or neutral; I just don't know; the meaning of the term is unclear). In a second step, the response option, "It depends on the situation," was included as one of three possible explanations for the initial trait rating. We found a quite consistent 5% difference in the situational response proportions between the self and other ratings. For all six of the possible numerical response values on the rating scale, and for 62% of the specific antonym pairs, subjects used this option more frequently when describing themselves than when describing another.

In further explorations of the self-other extension of the actor-observer effect, investigators may wish to hold constant the person whose behaviors are described by employing pairs of close friends, each of whom describes both self and friend. Moreover, our study employed only two levels of consistency versus variability. It might be useful to replicate this study using a multistep rating scale in Step 2 of the task, thus permitting a more fine-grained analysis of perceived behavioral consistency.

Finally, it is important for investigators of social cognition to try to understand more clearly the exact conditions under which the actor-observer effect is most likely to occur. We know in a general way that individuals should possess more information about themselves than about any other person, and specifically that they have had the opportunity to observe their own actions in more types of situations than has anyone else (the only possible exceptions to this truism are Siamese twins). However, we know little about those characteristics that are associated with individuals' differential tendencies to display the actor-observer effect or about those characteristics of the relationship between self and other that lead to greater versus lesser effects. To those questions we should now turn.

NOTE

1. The values presented in Table 1 are the proportions of responses of each type elicited by that target across the 60 (terms) by N (subjects) in each condition (e.g., 60 × 78 = 4,680 total responses in the intensity condition). All analyses of statistical significance are correlated-Z tests of the differences between the response proportions elicited by the two targets. For virtually all of these comparisons, the number of degrees of freedom is so large that extremely small differences in the two proportions are statistically significant.

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