Attribution of Traits to Self and Others: Situationality vs. Uncertainty

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Although there is considerable support for the hypothesis that people attribute more dispositional traits to others than to themselves, the use of trait adjectives in this kind of research results in a number of methodological problems. The present study addresses the possible confounding of preference for a "situational" description with response uncertainty. Subjects were required to attribute traits to themselves, to a "typical smoker," and to a "typical nonsmoker," the response format being varied between conditions. Subjects attributed more traits to themselves than to others, and more to similar others than to dissimilar others. Further analysis indicated that a "situational attribution" in this type of trait-inference research is confounded with response uncertainty. It is concluded that one should be cautious in interpreting personality trait ratings as indicators of basic attributional processes.

Attribution theory deals with the rules people use in their attempts to explain their own and others' behavior. One of the most robust findings from the extensive literature on attribution theory is that individuals tend to explain their own behavior in more situational ways ("I hit him because he insulted me") while explaining the behavior of others in more dispositional ways ("He hit him because he is aggressive"). This phenomenon, known generally as the "actor-observer" difference in attribution, has been demonstrated by a voluminous research literature (see Kelley & Michela, 1980, for a review). A considerable number of studies testing the above hypothesis relied on trait adjectives as stimulus material; for example, Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Marecek (1973) demonstrated this bias by asking subjects whether each of a set of trait-terms, its antonym, or the phrase "it depends on the situation" provided the most accurate description of themselves and of various others. Goldberg (1978) used a similar format. In his study an extensive set of 2,800 English trait-terms was administered to 14 samples of 100 subjects who were asked to describe themselves and three others they knew well. Monson, Tanke, and Lund (1980) used a single-stimulus format, with instructions to circle those terms that described the target accurately.

The present study investigates a methodological issue that questions the pervasiveness of the hypothesis that people ascribe more personality traits to others than to themselves. Fiske and Cox (1979) pointed out the shortcomings of using trait descriptions as response material in person perception research. Their findings showed that personality traits form only one part of the description process and that subjects are less willing to describe *unknown* others in terms of personality traits. Fiske and Cox concluded that research in person perception should expand both the stimulus and the response repertoires to include alternatives like behavior patterns, gender,

and physique. Goldberg (1978, 1981) studied the use of trait adjectives in direct relation to the actor-observer hypothesis. He demonstrated that in the typical trait inference study the use of the situational response option is likely to be confounded with response uncertainty or stimulus ambiguity on the part of the respondent. As a consequence, it is not possible to determine from most studies to what extent a "situational response" reflects an average or neutral position of the target on the attribute continuum, response uncertainty, or genuine "situationality" (i.e., dependence on the situation).

The present study was designed to test the possible confounding of situationality and response uncertainty. We employed the response format used by Goldberg (1978). By including a condition in which the response categories were cast in terms of certainty and the inclusion of perceived difficulty of subjects' self- and other descriptions as a variable, we attempted to unconfound response uncertainty and preference for a situational description.

METHOD

Subjects

A sample of 150 members of the public who one year earlier had completed a postal questionnaire concerned with their intentions to give up smoking were sent a subsequent questionnaire asking them to describe a "typical smoker," a "typical nonsmoker," and themselves on a number of traits. All subjects had originally contacted a television company (Granada Television) after a program on giving up smoking and an offer of free "antismoking kits" (cf. Eiser, 1982). A total of 92 questionnaires were returned, of which nine were inadequately completed and therefore excluded from the analysis. The sample contained 73 smokers and 10 ex-smokers.

Terms Employed

A set of 22 trait-descriptive terms was selected from the list of trait-adjectives used by Anderson (1968) and Greenberg, Saxe, and Bar-Tal (1978). The attempt was made to select only adjectives that were *descriptively relevant*, that is, adjectives that could be used to describe various forms of "smoking-behavior." Furthermore, on the basis of the evaluative ratings obtained by Anderson (1968) an equal number of favorable and unfavorable adjectives were included in the final set of 22. Finally, an attempt was made to include both favorable and unfavorable terms to describe a "smoker" and "nonsmoker" in a balanced fashion. The 22 terms used in the study were: *relaxed, strong-willed, easygoing, rational, cool-headed, calm, self-confident, fearless, energetic, healthy, and intelligent* (all evaluatively positive); and *tense, foolish, nervous, fearful, weak-willed, irritable, frustrated, unintelligent, depressed, unwise, and suspicious* (all evaluatively negative.)

Procedure

Subjects were asked to describe a "typical smoker," a "typical nonsmoker," and themselves. To rate these targets, subjects were presented the above list of trait-descriptive terms. The terms were presented in the same (random) order to all subjects. The 22 terms were rated on one of the following rating scales:

Condition 1:
A. The word is *generally a good or accurate description.*
B. The word is *generally not a good or accurate description.*
C. The word is *sometimes accurate, sometimes not.*

Condition 2:
A. The word is *generally a good or accurate description.*
B. The word is *generally not a good or accurate description.*
C. The word is *only occasionally accurate.*

Condition 3:
A. The word is *definitely a good or accurate description.*
B. The word is *probably a good or accurate description.*
C. *Don't know.*
D. The word is *probably not a good or accurate description.*
E. The word is *definitely not a good word or accurate description.*

Subjects were randomly allocated to one of these three conditions. The response alternatives in the first two conditions were similar to the response alternatives used by Goldberg (1978) the (C) response being interpreted as more "situational" than the (A) and (B) responses. There were five response categories in Condition 3 because of the necessity to distinguish between more and less certain responses on both sides of the scale. Responses in this condition were interpreted in terms of certainty; that is, the middle categories were assumed to represent a less certain response than the extreme categories. Finally, subjects were asked whether they smoked or not and were asked to indicate which of the three targets they found most difficult to describe.

RESULTS

In analysis of the data, the proportion of the subjects giving a "situational" or "uncertain" response was the major dependent variable. If Goldberg's assumption is correct, one would expect that self-other differences in preference for the situational option would be similar in the three response method conditions. Both the first two conditions and the third condition (in which the response alternatives were cast in terms of certainty) should result in similar self-other differences. First it was

TABLE 1
Proportion of Situational/Uncertain Responses as a Function of Perceived Difficulty

	TARGET	
Response method	**Most difficult target**	**Remaining targets**
1. (Sometimes)	.55	.40 t (29) = 3.83*
2. (Occasionally)	.45	.36 t (24) = 2.94**
3. (Probably)	.76[a]	.68 t (27) = 2.31**
Average	.59	.48 t (82) = 5.26*

Note: We compared the proportion of situational/uncertain responses in describing the "most difficult" target with the *average* proportion of situational/uncertain responses selected to describe the two remaining targets.

[a]These proportions represent the *three* middle categories.

*$p < .001$.

**$p < .05$.

tested whether the first two conditions resulted in similar difference scores. To test this, the data were cast in an analysis of variance design with the self-other difference as a dependent variable and the response method as an independent variable.

Results showed no significant difference between the first two conditions [$F(1,80)=2.93$, ns]. More importantly, further analyses showed that the self-other differences also followed the same pattern in Condition 3. The contrast between Conditions 1 and 2 versus Condition 3 revealed no significant difference [$F(1,80)=2.27$, ns]. The above results support Goldberg's proposal that preference for the situational option is confounded with response certainty.

A further corollary of the proposed relationship between preference for the situational option and response uncertainty is that the target one finds most difficult to describe is rated more situational/uncertain than the two remaining targets. This prediction was tested by first assessing for each subject which of the three targets he/she found most difficult to describe and then comparing the proportions of situational/uncertain responses in describing this target with the average proportion of situational/uncertain responses used to describe the remaining two targets. The proportion of the situational/uncertain responses to describe a "difficult" other was .11 higher than the average proportion for the two remaining targets, a highly significant difference [$F(1,80)=27.71, p<.001$]. Furthermore, this effect was constant over the three conditions; the differences were respectively .15, .09, and .08 (see Table 1).

In summary, the three response methods show similar results and clearly suggest that in this trait-inference task, the situational response is confounded with uncertainty.

Self-Other Differences

In the analyses presented below we compared self-descriptions with descriptions of a "similar target" and a "dissimilar target" (either a smoker or a nonsmoker, depending upon the smoking status of the respondent). Table 2 presents the mean pro-

TABLE 2
Proportions of Subjects Using the Situational Response Option for the Average Term When Describing Themselves, a Similar Other, and a Dissimilar Other

Target	Response method 1 (Sometimes) (n=30)	Response method 2 (Occasionally) (n=25)	Response method 3 (Probably) (n=28)[a]	Response method 3 (Probably) (n=28)[b]
Self	.37	.37	.61	.09
Similar other	.44	.39	.75	.24
Dissimilar other	.55	.41	.75	.31

[a]Uncertainty defined as the three middle categories of the 5-point scale.
[b]Uncertainty defined as the middle category (don't know) only.

portions of situational/uncertain responses selected to describe the three targets in each of the three conditions.

Table 2 clearly shows that other-descriptions elicit more "situational" responses than self-descriptions. The overall proportion of "situational" responses for the average other was .55, compared to .45 for self-descriptions, a significant difference [$F(1,80)=23.03, p<.001$]. This self-other difference was significant both for a similar other [$F(1.80)=13.74, p<.001$] and for a dissimilar other [$F(1,80)=26.22, p<.001$].

A further finding is that subjects' preference for the situational/uncertain response option was related to similarity of behavior; that is, a dissimilar other was described in a more situational/uncertain way than a similar other [$F(1,80)=4.70, p<.05$]. Considering the above-mentioned results on the influence of difficulty upon preference for the situational/uncertain response option, it is not surprising that a dissimilar other not only is described in the most situational/uncertain way but also is regarded as most difficult to describe by most of the subjects. Forty-eight percent of the subjects found a dissimilar other most difficult to describe, a percentage that is significantly higher than both the percentage of subjects (24) who found a similar other most difficult to describe [$t(82)=2.90, p<.005$] and the percentage (29) who found self-descriptions most difficult [$t(82)=2.15, p<.05$].

DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment provide clear support for the view that the response categories used in a number of trait-attribution studies do have an important drawback; that is, the situational response is confounded with uncertainty on the part of the respondent. Both the comparison of the three conditions and the influence of perceived difficulty upon preference for the situational/uncertain option suggest that the above assumption is correct. In other words, our findings show that people are less certain when describing others. Our interpretation of these findings goes back to early work on the intensity of attitudes (Cantril, 1946; Suchman, 1950). Further support is provided by recent research on how information about the self and others

is processed. Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker (1977) and Kuiper and Rogers (1979) conducted a series of experiments to investigate self-other differences in the processing of information using an incidental recall paradigm. Results showed that self-ratings were consistently judged as easier to make and that subjects always placed more confidence in these judgments. Furthermore, recall for self-descriptions was superior to that for descriptions of others.

Our finding that dissimilar others were regarded as more difficult to describe than similar others and were also described in more situational/uncertain terms provides further evidence for this possible confounding. In the light of the well-established relationship between similarity, attraction, and familiarity (Byrne, 1971; Moreland & Zajonc, 1982) our results are in accordance with those obtained by Goldberg (1981). It seems, therefore, that our subjects found a similar other more familiar and hence easier to describe than a dissimilar other. In other words, both Goldberg's 1981 findings and ours suggest that familiarity correlates negatively with uncertainty.

The present research also resulted in self-other differences that contradict the bulk of the findings obtained in attribution research; that is, our subjects attributed more traits to self than to others. One possible explanation for this effect is that the majority of our subjects were in a situation (i.e., trying to give up smoking) in which their own behavioral history and their own personality characteristics became more salient (see, for example, Bentler & Speckart, 1979). Monson et al. (1980) obtained findings that, like ours, contradict the general attributional hypothesis; and they suggested that this contradiction could be because traits may be more valid behavioral predictors in naturalistic settings than in laboratory experiments (see also Monson and Snyder, 1977). Goldberg (1981), however, rejects this argument on the ground of the confounding of situationality and uncertainty in the Monson et al. (1980) study. Present findings confirm Goldberg's conclusion.

However, in view of our rather specific sample and task (rating a typical other instead of a specific other) we acknowledge that the present research cannot provide an answer regarding the different pattern of self-other differences. Our main point is that "situational" attributions, whether to self or to other, are typically measured in a form that confounds situationality and uncertainty. Present findings serve as a reminder of the fact that a number of trait-rating procedures should be interpreted with considerable caution and cannot be regarded as indicators of basic attributional processes.

NOTE

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