

Observers' Focus of Attention in the Simulation of Self-Perception

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This research was designed to assess the effects of a manipulation of observers' focus of attention—from a focus on the actor to a focus on the actor's situation—upon observers' attributions of attitude to an actor in a simulation of a forced-compliance cognitive dissonance experiment. Observers induced through empathy instructions to focus attention on the actor's situation inferred less actor attitude positivity than did observers given no specific observational set. In addition, situation-focused observers inferred that the actor's attitude was directly related to reward magnitude, whereas actor-focused observers inferred that the actor's attitude was inversely related to reward magnitude. An extension of self-perception theory, offered as an interpretation of these and other results, suggested that motivation attributions made by actors and observers in dissonance and simulation studies are dependent on focus of attention. The attributions made by actor-focused observers simulate those of objectively self-aware actors and are based upon perceived intrinsic motivation; the attributions of situation-focused observers simulate those of subjectively self-aware actors and are based upon perceived extrinsic motivation.

Traditional theories of self-concept have been supplanted in recent years by two rather intriguing new theories of self-knowledge. Self-perception theory (Bem, 1967, 1972) is addressed to the processes whereby an individual makes self-attributions by observing his own overt behavior and the circumstances in which the behavior occurs. Objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975) is concerned with the attributional and behavioral concomitants of an individual's self-focused versus non-self-focused attention. Although these two theories have been used to explain a variety of similar findings, only little empirical activity has been directed toward the integration of the theoretical frameworks. We undertook the present research to explore the possibility of such a synthesis in a particular area to which both theories have

been applied—the area of forced-compliance cognitive dissonance phenomena.

Self-perception theory has been constructed, in large part, on the controversy stemming from Bem's (1967) reinterpretation of the classic cognitive dissonance experiment performed by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959). In this early study, subjects promised \$1 for advocating participation in a boring experimental task they had just completed were later found to be more positive toward the task than subjects promised \$20. To explain this reverse-incentive effect in terms of self-perception, Bem suggested that subjects in the experiment were simply observing their own behavior (advocating participation in the experiment) and attributing causality for the behavior to the situation when external incentives were large (\$20) and to themselves when external incentives were small (\$1). In support of this interpretation, Bem reported an interpersonal simulation in which observer-subjects were presented with a tape recording that described the participation of a typical subject, Bob Downing, in a particular condition of the dissonance experiment. The estimations of Bob's attitude toward the tasks made by observer-subjects paralleled the

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actual self-reports of attitude made by actor-subjects in the Festinger and Carlsmith experiment. According to Bem, the success of this simulation suggests that an individual is indeed an observer of his own behavior.

The initial impetus for our reconceptualization of the self-perception process was an anomaly recognized by Bem (1972). He noted that the similarity of actor and observer attributions in dissonance and simulation studies contradicted the actor-observer differences identified by Jones and Nisbett (1971). Research testing the Jones and Nisbett formulation has repeatedly demonstrated that actors attribute greater causality for their behavior to situations, whereas observers attribute greater causality for the same behavior to the actor's dispositions (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973). An extension of this difference to the interpersonal simulation suggests that observers should attribute greater attitude positivity to actors in dissonance studies than should actors themselves. The absence of such a disparity in the data reported by Bem (1972) indicates that actors and observers in dissonance and simulation studies hold similar attributional perspectives. We propose that this similarity is due to characteristics of the experimental situations that induce both actor and observer to focus their attention on the actor and not on his situation.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the hypothesis that variations in attributional perspective are traceable to variations in focus of attention (see Jones, 1976, for a review). Implicit in this view of the attribution process is the supposition that the individual searches not for a complete explanation of behavior, but rather for a sufficient explanation. Thus, the individual is more likely to attribute causality for an event with multiple possible causes to the possible cause toward which his or her attention is focused. Although an actor usually focuses attention on the situation and makes situational attributions for his or her behavior, movement of attention toward the self (through self-focusing stimuli such as an audience or mirror) produces observer-like, dispositional attributions (Duval & Wicklund, 1972, 1973). And, though ob-

servers usually focus attention on the actor and make dispositional attributions for the actor's behavior, movement of their attention toward the actor's situation through manipulations of perceptual salience (Storms, 1973; Taylor & Fiske, 1975) or through empathy instructions (Regan & Totten, 1975) produces actor-like, situational attributions for the same behavior. It is conceivable, then, that the correspondence of actor and observer attributions in dissonance and simulation studies is due to a correspondence in attentional focus.

Our contention that both actor and observer in these studies focus attention on the actor and not on the actor's situation is derived in part from evidence presented by Wicklund (1975). In reviewing a series of studies concerned with the relationship between objective self-awareness and cognitive dissonance, Wicklund concluded that self-focused attention is a necessary condition for the reduction of dissonance. The implication of this statement, that actor-subjects in dissonance experiments focus attention on themselves, has also been the conclusion of investigators commenting on the actual experimental arrangements of such studies (see, e.g., the "evaluation apprehension" argument offered by Rosenberg, 1965). Apparently the observers in Bem's simulations were making characteristic observer-like attributions and, in so doing, were simulating the attributional responses of objectively self-aware actors.

The present research was designed to test the validity of this reasoning by investigating the attributions of actor attitude made by observers when their attention is focused on the actor's situation. The manipulation of observer focus of attention chosen for this purpose was the set of empathy instructions employed by Regan and Totten (1975). These researchers adapted the "imagine him" instructions devised by Stotland (1969) such that they would be appropriate for observers of an interpersonal interaction. It was found that observers given this observational set, as contrasted with those given no specific set, were more likely to make situational than dispositional attributions for an actor's behavior and were also more likely to report

spending a greater amount of time attending to the actor's situation. Although the exact mechanism by which an empathic orientation induces observers to attend to an actor's situation is not entirely apparent, Regan and Totten have proposed that the empathy instructions—which emphasize the moods and emotional states of the actor—may attune the observer to the situational factors responsible for the actor's states. Situational factors may then be more salient in the sense that they are more available for memory retrieval (cf. Pryor & Kriss, 1977).

Observers focusing on the actor's situation in a dissonance paradigm were expected to differ from observers in the usual simulation in two ways. First, a straightforward application of the focus of attention—causal attribution hypothesis (Duval & Wicklund, 1973) suggests that situation-focused observers, as contrasted with actor-focused observers, would be less likely to attribute a positive attitude toward the task to the actor in both the small (\$1) and large (\$20) incentive conditions. This main effect hypothesis follows from the idea that a situation focus would reduce the extent of attribution to the actor's dispositions. A second, more striking hypothesis can be derived from a more detailed analysis of the process of motivation attribution. Theorists concerned with the attribution of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have questioned the traditional attribution theory view of internal and external causation, suggesting that the equation of this dichotomy with a dimension of personal versus impersonal causation is misleading (see, e.g., Deci, 1975; Kruglanski, 1975; Monson & Snyder, in press). They propose that the individual may be seen as internally motivated to act on the basis of external factors. Thus, attributions of motivation to an individual could be ascriptions of intrinsic motives (e.g., "He wanted to do it") or extrinsic motives (e.g., "He wanted to do it for the money"). In each case, the actor is attributed with intention to behave.

On the basis of this analysis, we predicted that the reverse-incentive effect found when observers focus on the actor would itself be reversed when observers focus on the actor's situation; an incentive effect (more money,

more attitude positivity) should result from a situational focus of attention. This prediction follows when it is recognized that self-perception theory, in its present form, is concerned only with the individual's perception of intrinsic motivation. This is not surprising, since both dissonance and simulation studies appear to deal with actor-focused attention. The actor is seen as the cause of his behavior, and his motivation to behave is calculated as the inverse of situational causes. But when attention is focused on the actor's situation, the situation is seen as the cause of the actor's behavior. Since monetary reward is part of that situation, inferences about the actor's motivation to behave should be based upon extrinsic levels of monetary reward. Movement of attention toward the situation and toward the rewards inherent in that situation should lead an observer to make inferences about the actor's attitude positivity in direct correspondence with perceived extrinsic motivation.

Method

Subjects and Design

One hundred undergraduates (54 males and 46 females) recruited from introductory psychology classes at five colleges and universities in San Antonio volunteered to participate as subjects. They were scheduled in groups of 5–20. Individuals were randomly assigned to a cell ($n = 25$) of a 2×2 factorial design under the restriction that the percentage of males and females remain approximately the same across cells. Two cells of the design constituted an exact replication of the \$1 and \$20 conditions in Bem's (1967) simulation of the Festinger and Carlsmith experiment (1959). The other two cells replicated these conditions, with the exception that observer-subjects were given empathy instructions designed to shift their focus of attention away from the actor and toward the situation. The 2×2 design was employed, therefore, to assess the effects of reward magnitude (\$1 versus \$20) and focus of attention (actor versus situation) upon the dependent measure, the observer-subjects' estimations of the actor's attitude toward the tasks.

Simulation Instructions and Procedure

Subjects in all four conditions were given instruction sheets at the beginning of the experimental session and were asked to read them carefully as the experimenter read them aloud. The instructions, patterned after those given by Bem (1967), read as follows:

The purpose of this experiment is to determine how accurately people can judge another person.

You will be listening to a tape-recorded description of events experienced by Bob Downing, a college sophomore. The description will last about 10 minutes after which you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire.

A second paragraph was added to these instructions for the two situation-focus groups. This manipulation of observational set was the same as that used by Regan and Totten (1975). The instructions read:

In a few moments you will be listening to the tape. While you are doing so, please try to empathize with Bob. Imagine how Bob feels as he participates in the events. While you are listening about him, picture to yourself how he feels in that situation. While you are listening about him, forget yourself, you are to concentrate on him in that situation. In your mind's eye you are to visualize how it feels to be Bob.

After reading the instructions, subjects listened to the tape-recorded description of a dissonance experiment. This tape recording, patterned after the tape used by Bem (1967), gave a narrative on the experimental tasks Bob performed and the payment he received (either \$1 or \$20) and ended with a dialogue between Bob and the "next subject" during which Bob quite enthusiastically advocated participation in the experiment.

When the tape was over, subjects filled out questionnaires containing a series of 11-point rating scales. The first of these, the major dependent measure, was the subject's estimation on a scale from -5 to +5 of Bob's response to the question: "Were the tasks interesting and enjoyable?" This question, as well as three other estimation questions ("Did the experiment give you an opportunity to learn about your ability to perform these tasks? Would you say the experiment was measuring anything important? Would you have the desire to participate in another experiment?"), followed exactly the questions used by Bem (1967) and Festinger and Carlsmith (1959).

The second set of questions called for the subject's opinion of Bob. These questions, 11-point scales anchored at the extremes, were the same as those originally employed by Storms (1973) and by Regan and Totten (1975) to assess the effectiveness of the manipulation of observers' perspectives. Subjects were asked to rate Bob's behavior along each of the four dimensions of talkativeness, friendliness, nervousness, and dominance. Following each of these ratings, the subject was asked to rate "How important were *personal characteristics* (personality, traits, character, personal style, attitudes, mood) in causing Bob to behave that way?" and "How important were *characteristics of the situation* (factors such as being in the experiment, the persuasion conversation, the conversation topics, the way the other student behaved) in causing Bob to behave that way?" When they had completed the questionnaire, subjects were carefully debriefed and sworn to secrecy.

Results

Manipulation Effectiveness

A measure of the efficacy of instructions in manipulating observers' attributional perspectives was calculated as the difference between the situational attribution (scored from 0-10) and the personal attribution (also 0-10) for each of the four behaviors (cf. Storms, 1973; Regan & Totten, 1975). A $2 \times 2 \times 4$ analysis of variance with repeated measures on the third factor was used to determine the variations in this index attributable to reward magnitude, focus of attention instructions, and behavioral dimension. The main effect for focus of attention was significant, $F(1, 96) = 8.59$, $p < .005$. Subjects in the situation-focus conditions more often attributed behavior to situational factors ($M = +.75$) whereas subjects in the Bem replication conditions, who were expected to focus on the actor, more often attributed behavior to dispositional factors ($M = -.55$). This finding indicated that the manipulation of observer attributional perspective through empathy instructions was indeed successful.¹ In addition, the absence of any other significant effects in this analysis indicated that the manipulation of focus of attention was not differentially effective across reward magnitude conditions or behavioral dimensions.

Separate analyses for situational and for personal attributions revealed a similar pattern. The main effect of focus of attention on personal attributions was significant, $F(1, 96) = 6.62$, $p < .02$. The actor-focus group mean personal attribution of 7.73 was greater than the corresponding mean of 6.80 for the

¹ It should be noted that in pilot investigations, the effects of another instructional condition were assessed. These instructions, patterned after the "watch him" instructions designed by Stotland (1969), were expected to induce greater observer attention to the actor. This was not the case; attributions made by these subjects did not reliably differ from those made by subjects in the Bem replication groups reported above. This result supports the contention that observer-subjects in simulations focus their attention on the actor and, in addition, suggests that the results reported for the situation-focus instructions cannot be interpreted in terms of a simple Hawthorne effect.

Table 1
*Mean Attitude Attribution as a Function of
 Reward Magnitude and Observer's
 Focus of Attention*

Observer's focus	Reward magnitude	
	\$1	\$20
Actor (Bem replication)	8.12	6.56
Actor's situation	4.56	7.52

situation-focus group. Although the main effect of focus of attention on situational attribution was nonsignificant, $F(1, 96) = 1.19$, the mean difference was in the expected direction. The mean situational attributions of the situation-focus and actor-focus groups were 7.55 and 7.17, respectively.²

Attitude Attributions

A 2×2 factorial analysis of variance was used to assess the effects of reward magnitude and focus of attention on the observers' estimates of the actor's attitude toward the tasks. The 11-point scale judgments were assigned values 0-10, with higher values indicating greater positivity; mean ratings given by the four groups are displayed in Table 1. The main effect for reward magnitude was not significant, $F(1, 96) = 1.86$. As predicted, the main effect for focus of attention was significant, $F(1, 96) = 6.42$, $p < .02$. Observers attending to the actor's situation attributed less attitude positivity to the actor ($M = 6.04$) than did observers attending to the actor ($M = 7.34$). The interpretation of this main effect must be tempered, however, in light of the highly significant interaction of reward magnitude and focus of attention, $F(1, 96) = 19.42$, $p < .001$.

A decomposition of the interaction by means of an analysis of simple effects (Winer, 1971) revealed that estimated attitude positivity was greater in the \$1 condition than in the \$20 condition for the actor-focus groups, $F(1, 96) = 4.63$, $p < .05$. This finding replicated the findings of Bem (1967). In contrast, the simple main effect of reward magnitude was significant in the opposite direction for the situation-focus groups, $F(1, 96) = 16.66$, $p < .001$. As predicted, observers

attending to the actor's situation attributed a more positive attitude to him in the \$20 condition than in the \$1 condition.

The significant interaction was also analyzed for the simple main effect of focus of attention at each of the two reward levels. Actor- and situation-focus groups did not differ significantly in their attribution of attitude to the actor receiving \$20, $F(1, 96) = 1.75$. The two groups did differ, however, in their estimation of the actor's attitude in the \$1 condition, $F(1, 96) = 24.09$, $p < .001$. Observers focusing attention on the actor attributed a much more positive attitude to him in the \$1 condition than those focusing on his situation. The mean rating of the \$1, situation-focus group (4.56) actually fell below the midpoint of the attitude scale (5), suggesting that this group attributed a slightly negative attitude to the actor.

Analyses of the three remaining attitude estimation items, also by means of 2×2 analyses of variance, revealed no significant main effects or interactions (at an a posteriori alpha level of .01). Since neither Bem (1967) nor Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) found any significant differences on these items, the present study also replicated this facet of the previous studies.

Discussion

The present results provide evidence that observers in a dissonance simulation who focus attention on the actor's situation infer less actor attitude positivity toward the tasks than do observers who focus on the actor. This finding supports our proposed explanation of the correspondence of actor and observer attributions in dissonance and simula-

² One other preliminary analysis was conducted to explore the function of the empathy instructions. To determine whether empathic observers might be more or less cautious than actor-focused observers in judging the behaviors of the actor, the absolute deviation from the scale midpoint (5) was calculated for the judgments made by each observer for each of the four behavioral dimensions. An analysis of variance parallel to those reported above was conducted on this index and indicated no significant main effects or interactions. Apparently, an empathic orientation does not lead observers to make more conservative or more extreme judgments of behavior.

tion studies. Both this result and the results of the manipulation check reinforce our contention that observers in Bem's (1967) simulations focused attention on the actor and made dispositional attributions for his behavior.

Of greater interest, however, are our findings regarding the relationship between observers' focus of attention and their estimations of actor attitude positivity in the two reward-magnitude conditions. The reverse-incentive effect reported by Bem (1967) was replicated in the present research for observers given no additional instructions to refocus their attention. When observers were given empathy instructions planned to divert their attention to the actor's situation, their estimations of the actor's attitude reflected a simple incentive effect. They attributed motivation to him in accord with the magnitude of reward. Focus of attention, in addition to determining the extent of dispositional versus situational attribution for an act, also appears to determine the manner in which the actor's motivation to perform the act is conceptualized. When attention is focused on the actor, his intrinsic motivation to perform the act is inferred. When attention is focused on the actor's situation, his extrinsic motivation is inferred. This finding requires that the self-perception explanation of dissonance simulations be expanded to include focus of attention effects.

While the present findings are of course limited to observers of a forced-compliance dissonance experiment, the prospect of generalizing the findings—both to actors and to other paradigms—holds considerable appeal. If inferences about an actor's motivation made by an observer have implications for the actor's own inferences, then it might be expected that a self-focused actor would exhibit reverse-incentive effects, whereas a situation-focused actor would exhibit incentive effects. The argument presented by Wicklund (1975), cited earlier, does suggest that reverse-incentive effects would be obtained when an actor was objectively self-aware (self-focused); it does not entertain the possibility, however, that incentive effects might arise when an actor was subjectively self-aware (situation-focused). Though such

a conclusion must necessarily be only tentative, pending empirical testing, it is interesting to note that some previous research does lend itself to interpretation in terms of a subjective self-awareness-incentive effect hypothesis. Studies by Rosenberg (1965) and by Crano and Messé (1970), for example, both instituted variations in the usual forced-compliance cognitive dissonance experimental arrangements that led to the production of incentive effects. In the Rosenberg study, subjects had to walk from one room to another, some distance away, between the initial counterattitudinal advocacy session and the later attitude measurement session. In the Crano and Messé research, a picture completion task was interposed between the same two segments of the experiment. Any type of task orientation (e.g., walking, drawing, etc.), because it interferes with self-focused attention, is seen to heighten subjective self-awareness by Duval and Wicklund. It could well be, then, that the incentive effects observed in these studies were due to the actor-subjects' situation-focused attention.

The present results can also be viewed from the more general perspective of motivation attribution. In looking beyond the phenomena of forced-compliance cognitive dissonance simulations, it can be suggested that the present findings signal a new approach to the relationship between behavior and motivation. Though a variety of studies have indicated that perceived intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are negatively related (see, e.g., Calder & Staw, 1975), few if any investigations have examined the conditions under which an individual might behave in accord with perceived intrinsic versus extrinsic motives. Future research would do well to investigate the role of focus of attention in this process.

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