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Limiting the spread of spontaneous trait transference ☆

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Abstract

Spontaneous trait transference (STT) occurs when individuals describing others are perceived to possess the very qualities implied by those descriptions. The current research proposed that the formation of such informant-trait associations would be disrupted by the presence of the target of the description. That is, the target would capture attention, lowering the likelihood of an informant-trait linkage being formed at behavioral encoding. Two studies demonstrated that when participants' attention was focused on the subject of trait-implicative descriptions, associations were not reliably formed between others present at the time of encoding and the implied traits (Study 1); nor were those individuals more likely to be seen as possessing that trait (Study 2). Results are discussed in terms of the processes underlying STT as well as the impression-management limitations of such a technique.
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Considerable research has examined whether perceivers spontaneously infer an actor's traits from that actor's behavior. Evidence suggests that such spontaneous inferences will, indeed, be made. For example, several studies (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005) show that if an actor describes his or her own trait-implying behavior, perceivers will judge that actor as possessing that trait. Thus, if Nick describes his own rude behaviour, he is perceived to be rude. Importantly, this occurs regardless of the extent to which the perceivers are explicitly attempting to form an impression of the actor.

Recent research (for a review, see Uleman, Blader, & Todorov, 2005) has explored how to detect spontaneous inference-making without directly asking participants for inferences. For example, Carlston, Skowronski, and colleagues (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Carlston, Skowronski, & Sparks, 1995) showed that learning an association between an actor photo and a trait word was facilitated when that photo had been previously paired with a trait-implying behavior description. Such enhanced learning suggests that an inference was made about the actor on initial exposure to the behavior.

However, similar (although weaker) facilitated learning of person-trait pairs occurs when the person in the photo is merely a communicator, describing the behavior of another individual (Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). Moreover, such descriptions also yield heightened ratings of the informant along the trait dimension implied by the behavior. Thus, if Nick describes the friendly behavior of Angela, he will be more readily associated with the trait term *friendly* in a paired-associates learning task and will be perceived as slightly friendlier than if he had not described her behavior. The term *spontaneous trait transference* (STT) has been assigned to this tendency to ascribe the trait implied by a third-party's behavior to the informant.

STT has the potential to be an impression-manipulation technique: it is easily implemented and bypasses social

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norms against self-boasting (Inman, McDonald, & Ruch, 2004). STT also resists attempts to control or avoid the effect. For example, STT effects emerge when: (a) informants are well known (Mae, Carlston, & Skowronski, 1999), (b) perceivers know that behaviors and photos were randomly paired (Skowronski et al., 1998, Study 3), and (c) participants are warned about the effects of STT and told to avoid them (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005).

Explanations for STT must account for the ubiquity and robustness of the STT effect. Skowronski et al. (1998) proposed a three-stage model possessing such properties. They argued that the trait concept implied by the behavior becomes activated (*trait activation*) during exposure to the behavior. Once activated, an associative link forms in memory between a mental representation of the informant and the activated trait (*trait association*). Finally, when a trait judgment is later requested, the perceiver erroneously uses this informant-trait linkage to make a judgment about the informant (*trait influence*).

One implication of this model is that the STT effect ought to weaken if one can prevent association formation. Accordingly, one line of inquiry would be to engage in manipulations that lower the probability that the mental representation of the informant and the activated trait co-occur in memory. Interestingly, most research investigating STT uses a paradigm that seemingly facilitates this co-occurrence. In a typical STT experiment, an informant's photo is paired with the informant's description of the behavior of an unseen other. The fact that the target of the communication is not depicted during the stimulus presentation probably induces participants to attend to the informant while processing the description. However, such attention may not occur when a photo of the actor accompanies the informant's behavior description. Under such circumstances, participants may focus on the actor's photo rather than on the informant's photo. If this occurs, the STT effect should be reduced or eliminated.

The logic is similar for photos that depict bystanders. Imagine a condition in which both a photo of an actor and a photo of a third-party, who is the description recipient (bystander), accompany the actor's self-behavior description. One can argue that there should be a low probability that participants will attend to the bystander photo, and hence, there should be a low likelihood of association formation between the mental representation of the bystander and the trait implied by the actor's behavior.

However, results obtained by Brown and Bassili (2002) suggest a different outcome. They found that bystander photos *did* become associated with the trait implied by an actor's behavior description. However, Brown and Bassili varied the nature of the photos that accompanied the descriptions. Some photos depicted people; some depicted novel non-social objects (e.g., a banana). Brown and Bassili found that associations occurred to both photo types. For example, recall of the trait *superstitious*, when cued with a banana photo, was facilitated when the banana depiction previously accompanied an actor photo paired with a description of the actor's superstitious behavior. This result implies that the formation of trait-bystander photo associations is inevitable (or nearly so), a simple consequence of bystander photos being presented in the same place and at the same time as trait-implicative behavior descriptions.

However, one can argue that the presentation of novel non-social photos might have encouraged attention to each of the non-social photos that accompanied behavior descriptions. In comparison, when the bystander stimulus is consistently a person photo, people may habituate to those bystander photos. As a consequence, association formation between the trait implied by each behavior and each bystander photo should not occur, a result reported by Todorov and Uleman (2004). The procedures described in the present article were similarly designed to explore the idea that the mere presence of bystander and informant photos in a stimulus presentation was not sufficient for the formation of an associative link between such photos and the traits implied by behavior descriptions.

Study 1

Participants in Study 1 encountered behavior descriptions accompanied by photos. Some descriptions were first-person (I threw the ball); others were third-person (She threw the ball). Some descriptions were trait-implicative; others were neutral. Paired with each description were photographs of two different individuals. In some conditions, these individuals were depicted as an *actor* and a *bystander* to whom the actor was describing the behavior. In other conditions, the individuals were depicted as an *informant* who described the behavior and a *target* whose behavior was described by the informant.

Participants subsequently engaged in a paired-associates task. They viewed photos paired with trait words and attempted to memorize the word paired with each photo. On some (*critical*) trails the trait word was implied by the behavior with which a photo was previously paired; on other (*control*) trials the trait word was not implied by the behavior. Later, participants were cued with each photo and attempted to reproduce the word with which it was paired.

A savings effect is indicated if trait word recall is greater on critical trials than on control trials. We are especially interested in whether savings effects emerge for informants and bystanders. The presence of such savings effects would suggest that even when actor or target photos capture most of a participant's attention, even minimal attention to informant and bystander photos may cause the formation of person representations that can co-occur in memory with traits abstracted from behavior descriptions. In comparison, the absence of savings effects for informants and bystanders would suggest that the mere presence of non-actor photos does not guarantee association formation; instead, the photos must be granted more than minimal attention before a photo-trait association can form.

Method

Participants

Forty-seven University of Bristol psychology students participated, receiving credit towards completion of course requirements. The study manipulated the variables of speaker (speaker vs. non-speaker), referent (self vs. other), and behavior (trait-implicative vs. trait-neutral) in a factorial within-participants design.

Materials

Materials for Study 1 have been used in previous STI and STT investigations (e.g., Skowronski et al., 1998). These included 48 photos (250×345 pixels $\times$ 16 million colors) and 24 behavior descriptions. The photos depicted Purdue University students who varied in age, gender (24 males and 24 females), and ethnicity. Some descriptions implied a specific trait; others did not (for pre-test ratings, see Carlston & Skowronski, 1994). The experiment was run on Dell Precision 360 PCs using InQuisit experimental software.

Procedure

Encoding phase. Sessions could accommodate up to four participants at a time. On entering the lab, each participant was led to a personal computer workstation isolated by dividers from other workstations. A description of the study was on the computer's screen and was also read aloud by the experimenter. Participants were told that the computer would present, on each trial, photographs of two people and a description of a behavior, and that the person on the left side of the screen always provided the description. Participants were also told that on some trials the person on the left would describe his or her own behavior (*self-informant condition*); but on other trials the person on the screen's left would describe the behavior of the person shown on the screen's right (*other-informant condition*). Participants were instructed to read the behaviors and look at the photographs in order to familiarize themselves with the types of materials that would be presented in the study. Thus, these familiarization instructions, used regularly in previous STI research (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Skowronski et al., 1998), explicitly avoid telling subjects to form impressions of the photographed individuals.

After finishing the instructions and starting the computer program, the photos and the behavior for the first trial simultaneously appeared. These stayed on the screen for 12 s, followed immediately by the next trial's stimuli. This continued until participants had viewed twenty-eight photo pair/description combinations. The first two and last two trials were fillers. On the other twenty-four trials, each participant read one of 6 trait-implicative self-descriptions, 6 trait-implicative other-descriptions, 6 neutral self-descriptions, and 6 neutral other-descriptions. The twenty-four critical trials were presented in random order with the constraint that trait-implicative behaviors were not presented after one another. Counterbalancing schemes were used so that photos appearing on trait-implicative trials for some participants appeared on neutral trials for other participants, and that photos appeared in all four roles (*actor*, *informant*, *bystander*, and *target*).

Confusion task. Following the final encoding phase trial, participants completed a filler task intended to make recall of the initial behaviors less likely (see Carlston & Skowronski, 1994). Participants read 30 pairs of behaviors and selected which person in each pair they liked better. Some behaviors implied the same traits implied by behaviors presented in the encoding phase.

Paired-associates task. Following completion of the confusion task, participants were shown each of the previously seen photos, presented in the middle of the screen, with a trait word directly beneath. Each photo-trait pairing was viewed for 6 s. Participants were informed that they were to memorize the word paired with each photo. Relearning trials are those in which the trait word was implied by the behavior with which the photo was paired with during the encoding phase. Learning trials are those in which the trait word did not relate to the behavior paired with the photo (i.e., the photo had been paired with a trait-neutral behavior). Because there were two photos shown on screen with a given behavior during the encoding phase, each was paired with the trait word implied by that behavior on separate (and non-consecutive) trials. Thus, even though each photo was paired with only one trait term, each trait term was paired with two different photos.

Trait recall task. Participants completed a 5 min anagram filler task intended to merely provide a filled delay between the learning and recall phases. Afterward, each photo from the learning task was presented, in random order. For each photo, participants were instructed to type into the computer the word with which the photo had been paired. Participants continued until all 48 trials were completed; participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and discussion

A coder blind to condition used a gist criterion to code the trait recalled on each trial as correct or incorrect. A percentage score for the number of traits correctly recalled by each participant was separately calculated for each cell in the design matrix. These percentages were entered into a 2 (Speaker: speaker vs. non-speaker) $\times$ 2 (Referent: self vs. other) $\times$ 2 (Behavior: trait-implicative vs. neutral) within-subjects ANOVA.

Results revealed a significant savings effect, $F(1,46) = 25.42$, $p < .001$: Recall of traits was significantly better when photos had been previously paired with trait-implicative behaviors ($M = .525$; neutral $M = .443$). The analysis also revealed a significant Speaker $\times$ Referent interaction, $F(1,46) = 44.41$, $p < .001$. However, both of these effects were qualified by a significant Speaker

× Referent × Behavior interaction, $F(1,46) = 7.77$, $p < .01$ (see Fig. 1).

Follow up analyses examining the behavior main effect of the behavior variable within each level of the Speaker × Referent interaction (i.e., representing the four person-stimulus types) were used to probe this interaction. For *actors* (photos of people who described their own behavior), correct recall of traits was significantly higher when the behavior was trait-implicative than when it was neutral, $F(1,46) = 21.82$, $p < .001$. This effect was not present for *bystanders*, $F(1,46) < 1$, *ns*: Participants did not correctly recall traits significantly more often when the bystander photo previously accompanied an actor's trait-implying behavior (and the actor photo) than when the bystander photo was previously paired with an actor photo accompanied by a trait-neutral behavior. The follow up analyses also revealed no significant savings for individuals who described the behavior of other people (*informants*), $F(1,46) = 1.25$, $p = .27$. Traits implied by informant descriptions were not better recalled than traits not implied by informant descriptions. However, savings did emerge for the *targets* of those descriptions, $F(1,46) = 13.15$, $p = .001$. Correct recall of traits was heightened when the target photo was previously paired with a trait-implying behavior than when it was not.

This pattern of results is consistent with the notion that people focus on actors when processing behavior descriptions. Doing so apparently lowers the probability that people associate the mental representation of non-actors (e.g., informants and bystanders) to the trait implied by the actor's behavior. Hence, STT and bystander effects may not be ubiquitous—the conditions under which a trait-implying actor description is processed may affect the tendency to associate an activated trait to mental representations of non-actors.

An alternative interpretation of the results involves the influence of subtle demand effects due to the within-subjects nature of the design. That is, one would expect traits to be associated with actors but not with non-actors if our perceivers were deliberative, thorough inference-makers. However, several points argue against demand characteristics as a viable explanation for our findings. First, participants were instructed to *familiarize* themselves with the materials—they were not instructed to make inferences. Second, instructional sets intended to break impressional demand (e.g., memorization) did not eliminate first-person savings effects (as a demand argument might suggest) in previous research (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Study 4). Finally, previous research has shown evidence of STT in between-subjects designs in which it is impossible for participants to mistakenly recall that an informant was describing his or her own behavior (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Scherer, 2006).

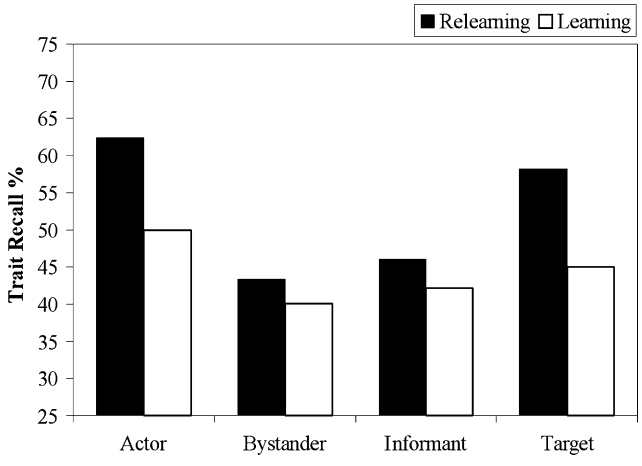

Fig. 1. Trait recall accuracy (percentage) as a function of speaker, referent, and trial type.

Study 2

Skowronski et al. (1998) showed that the trait-informant associations formed at encoding affect trait ratings of informants. The results from Study 1 suggest that such effects might be minimized or eliminated by the two-photo paradigm. Accordingly, the implicit memory trait learning and trait recall tasks used in Study 1 were replaced with an explicit impression (i.e., trait rating) task used in prior STT research. Given the results of Study 1, one would expect the trait ratings of actors and targets to be significantly heightened on the traits implied by their behaviors; this should not occur for informants and bystanders. If this prediction were to hold true, it would be only the second time in this program of research that STT effects in trait ratings did not emerge (see Carlston & Skowronski, 2005, Study 3): it has been hard to "turn off" STT effects.

The trait-rating task used in Study 2 requests trait ratings about each target, not only on the target trait implied by the behavior, but also on traits that are evaluatively congruent with, or evaluatively incongruent with, the critical trait. These ratings allow us to examine issues relating to the specificity of the judgments being made about the individuals. Specifically, Carlston and Skowronski (2005) argue that halo effects are more likely to occur for self-informants than for other-informants due to the fact that people use implicit personality theories (see Anderson, 1995; Schneider, 1973) to generalize perceptions of a target from existing inferences to other trait dimensions. Because people are thought not to have such target attributions stored in memory in STT conditions, but generate those attributions in response to a trait query, generalization to other trait dimensions should be less likely than in STI conditions. The design of Study 2 allows us to see whether this prediction extends to targets of descriptions and bystanders, as well.

Method

Participants

Fifty-two students who responded to one of several University advertisements or flyers were paid £7 (approximately US$13.50) for their participation.

Procedure

The procedure for the second experiment closely matched that of Study 1, with the following exception. The trait learning and trait recall tasks from the Study 1 were replaced with a trait rating task. Participants rated the person depicted in each photo on three different trait dimensions. Each rating was made on a nine-point scale with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*) and 9 (*extremely*), with the midpoint (5) labelled *moderately*.

Each participant made ratings of 48 critical traits. Twenty-four of these were for individuals who had previously been paired with trait-implicative descriptions; the other 24 had been paired with neutral descriptions. Within each of these types, half of the photographed individuals (i.e., 12) had described behaviors (either as the *actor* or the *informant*); the other half were half were either *bystanders* or *targets*.

Each individual was also rated on an evaluatively congruent trait and an evaluatively incongruent trait, both of which were semantically unrelated to the critical trait. A counterbalancing scheme ensured that, across all people that were rated, a rating for a given trait was made only six times: Twice as a target trait, twice as an evaluatively congruent trait, and twice as an evaluatively incongruent trait. Moreover, the combinations of traits rated varied across targets. For example, the congruent and incongruent traits for one of the critical targets whose honesty was rated were *spontaneous* and *conceited*; those traits for the other target were *confident* and *cruel*. Participants made their 144 ratings (i.e., critical, congruent, and incongruent ratings for each of 48 targets), and afterwards, were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

Results and discussion

Critical implied traits

Mean trait ratings of the trait implied by the description with which a photo was paired were separately calculated for each cell of the design matrix for each participant. These means were submitted to a 2 (Speaker: speaker vs. nonspeaker) × 2 (Referent: self vs. other) × 2 (Behavior: trait-implicative vs. neutral) within-participants analysis of variance.

A significant effect of initial behavior emerged from the analysis, $F(1,51) = 8.23$, $p < .01$: Ratings were higher when the photographed individual was initially paired with a trait-implicative behavior than when paired with a neutral behavior. The analysis also revealed a significant Speaker × Referent interaction, $F(1,51) = 11.70$, $p < .01$, but along with the behavior main effect, this was qualified by a significant Speaker × Referent × Behavior interaction, $F(1,51) = 6.45$, $p < .02$.

Follow-up analyses probed the behavior main effect within each level of the Speaker × Referent interaction (see Fig. 2). The behavior main effect was significant for *actors*, $F(1,51) = 7.42$, $p < .01$. Ratings on critical traits were higher when the individual depicted in the photo said that they performed a trait-implicative behavior than when they did not. In comparison, *bystanders* did not receive significantly higher ratings on critical trials than control trials, although the difference approached significance, $F(1,51) = 2.93$, $p = .093$.

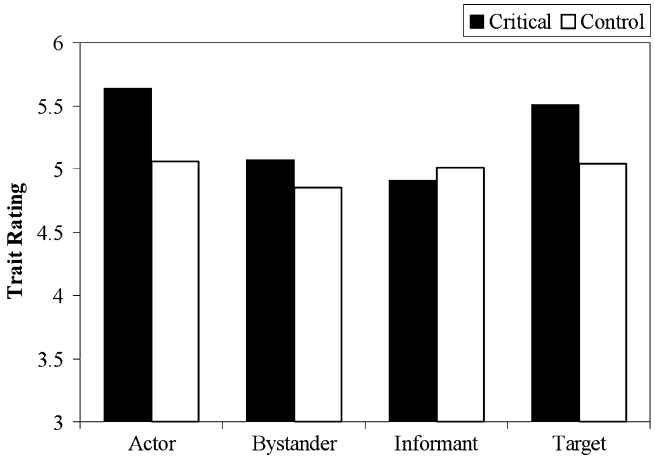

Fig. 2. Trait ratings (implied traits) as a function of speaker, referent, and trial type.

Similarly, the trait transference effect that is usually observed in single-photo studies was not reliable in the current study. Ratings of *informants* on the critical trait were actually lower (but not significantly so) when the informant described a trait-implicative behavior than when they did not, $F(1,51) < 1.0$, *ns*. However, the trait implication of the initial behavior did have a significant effect on ratings of the *target* of an informant's description. Targets received higher ratings on the critical trait when description was trait-implicative than when it was not, $F(1,51) = 8.25$, $p < .01$.

Non-implied traits

Additional analyses investigated whether the effects observed in the ratings of critical implied traits generalized to other, non-implied, traits. Separate averages were calculated within each cell of the design matrix for congruent trait ratings and for incongruent trait ratings for each participant. For each trait type, we then separately analyzed the behavior main effect for each of the four types of targets in this study.

For evaluatively congruent traits, the analyses revealed only significant evaluative generalization for *actors* (trait-implicative $M = 5.21$, neutral $M = 4.92$, $F(1,51) = 4.23$, $p = .045$) and *targets* (trait-implicative $M = 5.31$, neutral $M = 5.02$, $F(1,51) = 3.98$, $p = .051$). The behavior main effect was not significant in the analyses of ratings made about *informants* ($F(1,51) < 1.0$) or *bystanders* ($F(1,51) = 2.09$, $p = .154$). None of the comparisons examining ratings on the evaluatively incongruent trials yielded a significant effect (largest $F = 1.22$, $p = .274$).

In summary, then, the data from Study 2 dovetail nicely with the results from Study 1. In the view of Skowronski et al. (1998) if informant-trait associations or bystander-

trait associations infrequently occur (as suggested by Study 1), trait ratings of informants and bystanders should not be influenced by the trait implications of the behaviors with which they were paired. Accordingly, our data showed that ratings on traits implied by behaviors were significantly elevated only for those who performed behaviors, regardless of whether they were actors or targets. These ratings were not significantly elevated for informants or bystanders. These results are consistent with the idea that there was minimal associative activity between traits and mental representations of communicators and bystanders during encoding.

The results of Study 2 also suggest that evaluative generalization occurs in trait ratings of people who perform trait-implicative behaviors. However, the results of Study 2 evinced such generalization only on evaluatively congruent traits. While Carlston and Skowronski (2005) found that such generalization occurred primarily for actors, their logic should also apply to targets. Study 2 supports this idea. Finally, note that the evaluative generalization effects observed in Study 2 are far smaller than the effects observed on the critical target trait. This is consistent with Skowronski et al.'s, 1998 argument that the data from the savings and trait judgment task on traits implied by the behaviors do not reflect the action of evaluative judgments, but instead reflect the abstraction of specific trait inferences about actors.

General discussion

It was proposed that the formation of informant-trait associations would be disrupted by the presence of the target of the description. We argued that the target of the description would dominate attention, lowering the likelihood of forming an informant-trait linkage. It was also proposed that this should be the case for bystanders whose photo was presented as the recipient of an actor's self description. The non-significant savings effects for informants and bystanders in Study 1 and the absence of significant increases in trait ratings for informants and bystanders in Study 2 are both consistent with these contentions. Moreover, these results converge nicely with the results of Todorov and Uleman (2004), who found in a false recognition paradigm that associations were not formed to photos of bystanders. These results suggest STT and bystander effects may not be unavoidable—the conditions under which a behavior is viewed or a trait-implying actor description is processed may affect the tendency to associate an activated trait to non-actors.

Note that we do not claim that presentation of the actor or target photos in our paradigm totally eliminated *any* associations between traits and informants or bystanders. Brown and Bassili (2002) results show that such effects can emerge, even when actor or target photos also accompany a behavior description. Even the data from our studies suggests that this associative tendency may not have been totally eliminated by the presence of actor or target photos. Nonetheless, a comparison of data across studies in this line of research suggests that, in comparison to single-photo studies, the dual-photo paradigm substantially weakened the tendency to associate the implications of an actor's behavior to non-actors.

Moreover, the fact that presentation of the actor or target photo minimized the STT effect is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the STT effect has previously been robust to most attempts to interfere with the effect (e.g., Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Mae et al., 1999; Skowronski et al., 1998). However, many of the attempts at interference explored how variations in controlled processing (e.g., instructions to avoid the effect) might alter STT effects. People do not seem to realize that informant photo-trait associations form and influence judgments, so it makes sense that it is difficult for them to consciously avoid STT effects. Avoidance of such effects seems to require manipulations that prevent the initial formation of associations (as in the present studies) or that cause people to search memory in enough detail that they realize that they actually know little or nothing about the person in the photo.

Although we are assuming that the effects in the current studies were driven by differential visual attention to actors versus non-actors, there are other potential mechanisms underlying these effects. For example, Todorov and Uleman (2004) showed that although differential attention was likely partly responsible for the lack of a bystander effect in their work, attempts to equate the visual attention between actors and non-actors still did not produce a bystander effect. They argue that the actor effect in the absence of a bystander must take into consideration the spontaneous processing in which perceiver is engaged during encoding. However, it is possible that the modified savings-in-relearning paradigm is more sensitive to attentional differences than the modified false recognition paradigm in which each target was paired with a trait-implicative self-descriptive behavior. Nonetheless, given the alternative mechanisms that may be operating, we hesitate to offer additional speculation until additional data are collected.

The present data also speak to whether one can use the technique of describing other peoples' positive actions to manipulate one's own image. Results of the studies described in the present article imply that this tactic will be more effective when the target of the communication is not present when the behavior is described. To return to an earlier example, Nick (even if already known as a rude person) may obtain impression benefits by describing the friendly behaviors of Angela, but only when Angela is not present. Otherwise, people may focus on Angela and an association between Nick and the trait of *friendly* may not form.

Future research may show that other considerations may enter into the effectiveness of STT as an impression management technique. For example, Wyer and his colleagues (Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert, & Swan, 1994; Wyer, Swan, & Gruenfeld, 1995) have suggested that judgments of communicators in informal conversation depend on two considerations: (a) the literal meaning of what is said, and

(b) the pragmatic implications of the information. These latter implications can be affected by perceptions of *why* the statement was made as well as the manner in which the behavior was described (i.e., *how* the statement is made). Such considerations may lead people to abstract informant traits different from those implied by the communicated behavior. This perspective implies that the STT effect might be eliminated if participants were asked to think about why the informant decided to describe the third-party's behavior. The inference generated from the informant's event-describing behavior (e.g., a gossip) may prevent the formation of an association between the mental representation of the informant and the trait implied by the behavior they describe.

Another important consideration may involve the relationship between the informant and target of the communication. For example, Schlenker and Britt (1999) found that individuals engaged in strategic impression formation in describing their friends to others. In particular, they found that descriptions of friends matched desired traits when the opposite-sex perceiver was attractive, but were described as inconsistent with the desired traits when the perceiver was unattractive. They argue that informants are especially likely to help friends through impression management, in part, because in close relationships the other is often incorporated into the cognitive representation of the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). It should also be noted that in the current research the relationship between the informant and the target of the communication was not specified. This is potentially important because it seems likely that the relationship between these individuals may influence judgments of both individuals.

Conclusion

The fact that one can be perceived as honest by describing the honest behaviors of another, or, ironically, as dishonest by describing the dishonest behaviors of another, is a social judgment phenomenon that has both theoretical and applied (e.g., impression management) implications. For example, are all politicians really dishonest (some are), or are they perceived to be dishonest because they are always decrying the dishonesty of one another? In describing the dishonesty of an opponent, it is entirely likely that a politician is influencing others perceptions: the politician may be perceived as more dishonest than if nothing were said. Further explorations into STT as an impression management technique, and into such moderating variables as the role of the relationship between the informant and target of the communication, will contribute to our understanding of how descriptions of others' behaviors affect impressions of both targets and informants.

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