

---

---

## Anticipated Discussion of Interpretation Eliminates Actor-Observer Differences in the Attribution of Causality\*

GARY L. WELLS  
*University of Alberta*

RICHARD E. PETTY  
*University of Missouri-Columbia*

STEPHEN G. HARKINS  
*Northeastern University*

DOROTHY KAGEHIRO  
*University of Utah*

JOHN H. HARVEY  
*Vanderbilt University*

---

---

*An experiment was conducted to test whether actor-observer differences in attribution of causality for a particular behavior would be eliminated when each expected to share an interpretation with another person who also had witnessed the behavior. Traditional actor-observer differences were obtained under conditions of no anticipated discussion. However, anticipation of discussing an interpretation eliminated actor-observer differences, and this was true for behaviors resulting in both positive and negative outcomes. The data suggest that the actor-observer convergence is due primarily to observers shifting their attributions toward actors' attributions. It was suggested that an implication of this work is that actor-observer differences might not be pervasively observed in naturalistic settings involving shared communication of interpretations among people.*

Jones and Nisbett (1972) proposed that there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute causality for their own behavior to situational influences, while passive observers attribute causality for the same behavior to dispositions possessed by the actor. Jones and Nisbett's hypothesis has received general support in contexts involving behaviors producing relatively neutral or negative outcomes, but it also has been found that actors tend to attribute their own behavior to dispositional factors and that observers may attribute the same behavior to situational factors when the outcome is positive (e.g., Harvey *et al.*, 1974; Johnson *et al.*, 1964;

Sherrod and Farber, 1975; Snyder *et al.*, 1976; Streufert and Streufert, 1969; Wolosin *et al.*, 1973; Wortman *et al.*, 1973). Despite the qualifications that have emerged from research concerned with Jones and Nisbett's hypothesis, there is considerable evidence that actors and observers tend to diverge in their attributions of behavioral causality.

It is interesting to note, however, that actor-observer studies have usually dealt with "closet attributions" in the sense that subjects are asked to place a mark on various scales and do not anticipate the necessity of having to explain or defend their attributions. This fact seems problematic since real-world attributions are typically more "public" in that the attributor will often interact with other individuals who might have information regarding the behavior in question or who may require the attributor to defend the attributions s/he makes.

There are, in fact, theoretical reasons to suspect that in naturalistic settings, actor-observer differences regarding per-

---

\* This research was supported by a grant from the Vanderbilt University Research Council to the last author. Requests for reprints should be sent to Gary L. Wells, Department of Psychology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The authors wish to thank Arlene Redlich and Jean Tanner for assistance in the implementation of this research and Michael Baumgardner and David Ronis for their comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

ceptions of causality might not be as pervasive as the accumulated literature suggests. Cialdini, *et al.* (1973) have demonstrated that the anticipation of interaction with another person on a topic produces moderation of opinion on that topic prior to the interaction. Cialdini *et al.* (1973) argued that often the primary goal in a discussion situation is to present oneself in a favorable light. They further argued that a moderate position is an advantageous one to hold because

. . . such a position allows the greatest number of arguments and counterarguments to be put forth and, thus the greatest flexibility in dealing with opposing positions. . . . In general, moderate positions are associated with broad-mindedness and rationality—ideal traits to project in a discussion if one is concerned about maintaining a favorable impression. (Cialdini *et al.*, 1973: 101-102)

Cialdini *et al.*'s results support the contention that when expecting to be confronted with an opposing viewpoint on a topic, subjects are concerned with appearing open-minded and broad-minded, want to be cautious, and want to adopt a defensible position (see Hass, 1975; Hass and Mann, 1976, for similar results). Certainly in naturalistic settings, people are faced with situations in which they anticipate discussion, evaluation, etc. Cialdini *et al.* conclude that "Perhaps one of the reasons why genuine attitude change is so hard to demonstrate in real-world situations is that the adaptiveness of tactical anticipatory shifts precludes a direct confrontation between the attitude and a disconfirming reality" (Cialdini *et al.*, 1973: 108). Stated another way, perhaps attitudinal discrepancies are relatively rare in naturalistic public settings due to moderation shifts.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the theoretical machinery underlying moderation effects in the attitude literature and ideas articulated in the attribution literature. Stephan (1975) and Snyder *et al.* (1976) have presented evidence to indicate that actors and observers are aware of each other's divergent evaluative attributions. That is, actors and observers appear to be cognizant that their causal perceptions, like opinions, are not necessarily in line with others' causal perceptions.

Thus, when expecting to share an interpretation with a knowledgeable person, actors and observers might converge in their causal perceptions, as both actors and observers shift toward more cautious, defensible positions.

The present study was designed to test the extent to which "closet" attributions might differ from attributions made in the context of expecting to discuss an interpretation with another person who also observed the behavior. While the current study is concerned with naturalistic attribution, there is also a theoretical interest in the anticipated discussion variable itself. Thus, the paradigm was designed to maximize experimental control and yet introduce the "real-world" variable of anticipated discussion. In order to enhance generality, two behavioral outcomes were examined, a positive outcome and a negative outcome. The design was a 2 (no anticipation of discussion versus anticipated discussion)  $\times$  2 (positive outcome versus negative outcome)  $\times$  2 (actor versus observer) factorial. We predicted a three-way interaction of the following form: (1) Consistent with past literature, when there was no anticipation of discussion, actors should take more credit for positive outcomes than observers are willing to give them, while for negative outcomes, observers should place more blame on actors than they are willing to assume, that is, for positive outcomes actors should favor dispositional attributions more than observers, while for negative outcomes, actors should favor situational attributions. (2) When there was an expectation of discussion with another person, attributions should moderate because of self-presentation motives, attenuating the actor-observer differences, since (a) when the outcome is positive, actors should take less credit (become less dispositional), while observers should confer more credit (become more dispositional); and (b) when the outcome is negative, actors should assume more blame (become less situational), while observers should confer less blame (become more situational). Thus, for both types of outcomes actors and observers should moderate their extreme positions, each converging toward the other's position.

## METHOD

*Subjects*

The subjects were 96 female undergraduates attending a large public university. They were randomly assigned to conditions with 12 subjects per condition.

*Procedure*

Two subjects were run in each experimental session; one was randomly selected to serve as the actor and the other served as the observer. The sign-up sheets for the experiments were designed to imply the existence of a third "subject" (confederate) who also arrived in the waiting area.

Once all participants had arrived (2 subjects and the confederate), the experimenter escorted one subject to the experimental room and explained that her role was that of *observer* and that she was to watch carefully, but unobtrusively, the behavior of the subject to be designated as the assistant.

Upon returning to the waiting room, the experimenter escorted the second subject and the confederate to the experimental room where it was explained that the study concerned "interaction processes that occur during a cooperative perception task." A rigged drawing assigned the confederate the role of "worker" and the second subject was assigned the role of "assistant" (hereafter referred to as *actor*).

The worker (confederate) and actor were seated at a table in direct view of the observer. The worker was instructed to place 150 map pins of six different colors on a corkboard so as to correspond to a Star of David design (two interlaced equilateral triangles in the form of a six-pointed star), with each side of the triangle corresponding to a different pin color. The actor-assistant was instructed to "help the worker in this task." All three participants were informed of the presence of a female research trainee who would watch the experimental procedure from behind the one-way mirror and overhear instructions through an open microphone.

The assistant (actor) and worker were

allowed to work on the design for two minutes. Subsequently, the three participants were informed by the experimenter that the primary interest of the study actually concerned the helping behavior of the assistant (actor). The experimenter, having kept a count, informed all participants of the number of pins placed in the corkboard by the assistant (actor) during the two-minute period.

*Outcome Manipulation*

After explaining that pin-placement totals had been kept for all assistants run thus far in the experiment, the experimenter consulted a chart to determine what condition the subject was in. (Thus, both the experimenter and confederate were blind to the outcome manipulation before consulting the chart). Half of the subjects were informed that the assistant had helped more than 85% of the subjects run thus far and was "actually *more* helpful than most people" (positive outcome condition). The other half were informed that the assistant had helped more than 15% of the subjects run thus far and was "actually *less* helpful than most people" (negative outcome condition).

*Manipulation of Anticipated Discussion of Interpretation*

Subjects were then conducted to separate rooms where the experimenter again consulted her chart to determine conditions. Half the subjects in each outcome condition were informed that following completion of a questionnaire they would be meeting the research trainee who had been observing the experimental session, and the two of them would be discussing an explanation of the assistant's helping behavior (anticipated discussion condition). The other half were informed that completion of the questionnaire would mark the termination of the experiment (no anticipated discussion condition). Approximately two minutes later the experimenter returned with the questionnaire, repeated the anticipated discussion manipulation, and left the subject to complete the questionnaire.

*Dependent Measures*

The main dependent measure asked subjects to divide 100 points between the following two explanations, giving most points to the best explanation (the observer's version is in parentheses and the actor-assistant's version is in italics):

- *I* (The assistant) chose to help as much or as little as *I* (she) did because of some characteristic that *I* (she) possess (possesses). For example, *I* (she) *am* (is) typically helpful or friendly or typically not helpful or friendly, etc.
- *I* (The assistant) chose to help as much or as little as *I* (she) did because of some aspect of the situation in which *I* (she) found *myself* (herself). For example, the task was interesting or boring, the experimenter demanded that *I* (she) give that amount of help, etc.

In addition, subjects responded on 11-point scales, with end points appropriately labeled, to the following questions:

How much effort did you put into thinking about what occurred in the experiment?

To what extent did you feel a need to develop an accurate account of what happened in the experiment?

To what extent did you feel a need to be modest in your interpretation of what occurred in the experiment?

To what extent did you feel a need to be cautious in your interpretation of what occurred in the experiment?

To what extent did you feel someone would evaluate your interpretations of what occurred in the experiment?

Finally, subjects were given manipulation checks as described in the results. After responding to the questionnaire, the subjects were thoroughly debriefed and dismissed.

## RESULTS

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects analysis of variance with role set (actor versus observer), task outcome (positive versus negative), and anticipated discussion (anticipation versus no anticipation) as factors was employed for each of the following measures.

*Manipulation Checks*

*Anticipated discussion.* The following question served as a manipulation check for anticipated discussion:

What did the experimenter tell you was the reason for the research associate being in the next room?

1. I was not told of such a person.
2. She is simply observing so she can serve as the experimenter at a later date, and I will be discussing the events that occurred and explanations of them with her after this questionnaire.
3. She is simply observing behind the one-way window so she can serve as the experimenter at a later date.

The numbers that identified the three alternatives were used as the dependent measure in an analysis which revealed a main effect for anticipated discussion,  $F(1,88) = 30.1, p < .0001$ . Subjects in the anticipated discussion conditions endorsed the second alternative, which indicated this expectation,  $\bar{X} = 2.3$ , more than the no discussion condition subjects,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ , who uniformly endorsed the third alternative, indicating that anticipated discussion of interpretation was successfully manipulated.

*Task outcome.* Subjects indicated the percentage of subjects the assistant "helped more than" by selecting one of the alternatives ranging from 5% to 95% in ten percent intervals. Subjects in the positive outcome condition indicated that the actor-assistant helped more,  $\bar{X} = 85\%$ , than subjects in the negative outcome condition,  $\bar{X} = 19.6\%$ ,  $F(1,88) = 1059.1, p < .0001$ , indicating that task outcome was successfully manipulated.

*Number of pins placed.* There were no differences in the number of pins placed in the corkboard by the assistant as a function of experimental condition. A mean of 34.1 pins were placed in the board by the assistants in the two-minute period.

*Attribution Measure*

An analysis of variance performed on a "dispositional index" (obtained by subtracting the points assigned to situational factors from those assigned to disposi-

tional factors) yielded the predicted three-way interaction,  $F(1,88) = 9.9$ ,  $p < .01$ , which is graphed in Figure 1. A Newman-Keuls analysis of the dispositional index revealed that in the no-discussion, positive-outcome conditions, actors attributed the behavior more to dispositional factors,  $\bar{X} = 56.6$ , than did observers,  $\bar{X} = 8.3$ ,  $p < .05$ . When there was a negative outcome, actors attributed the behavior more to situational factors,  $\bar{X} = -50.2$ , than did observers,  $\bar{X} = 22.5$ ,  $p < .05$ . This pattern of results replicates previous findings in the attribution literature. However, under conditions of anticipated discussion, actor-observer differences reduced to nonsignificance for both positive and negative outcomes ( $ps > .20$ ).

An actor-observer  $\times$  task outcome interaction,  $F(1,88) = 18.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a task outcome main effect,  $F(1,88) = 44.7$ ,  $p < .0001$ , were also obtained. The former effect was the result of greater differences for actors between positive ( $\bar{X}_p = 44.7$ ) and negative ( $\bar{X}_n = -44.6$ ) outcomes, than for observers ( $\bar{X}_p = 20.8$ ,  $\bar{X}_n = 1.25$ ). The task outcome main effect was the result of the tendency for subjects to attribute the positive outcome behavior more to dispositional factors,  $\bar{X} = 32.8$ , than the negative outcome behavior,  $\bar{X} = 21.7$ .

A 2 (task outcome)  $\times$  2 (anticipated dis-

ussion) analysis of observers' attributions revealed a significant interaction,  $F(1,44) = 8.21$ ,  $p < .01$ , and no main effects. The same analysis of actors' data, however, revealed a main effect for task outcome [ $F(1,44) = 63.1$ ,  $p < .01$ ], but no effect for anticipated discussion [ $F(1,44) = .32$ ], and no interaction [ $F(1,44) = 2.4$ ]. Thus, while anticipated discussion had a significant effect on observers' attributions (as indicated by the interaction), the same manipulation did not significantly affect actors' attributions. Task outcome, however, affected both observers' attributions (in an interacting manner with anticipated discussion) and actors' attributions.

#### Ancillary Measures

Subjects in the anticipated-discussion conditions felt more cautious,  $\bar{X} = 8.1$ , than subjects in the no-anticipated-discussion conditions,  $\bar{X} = 5.7$ ,  $F(1,88) = 19.9$ ,  $p < .0001$ . In addition, observers indicated that they put more effort into thinking about an interpretation of what occurred,  $\bar{X} = 7.4$ , than actors,  $\bar{X} = 6.3$ ,  $F(1,88) = 7.7$ ,  $p < .01$ . No significant effects were obtained on the other ancillary measures.

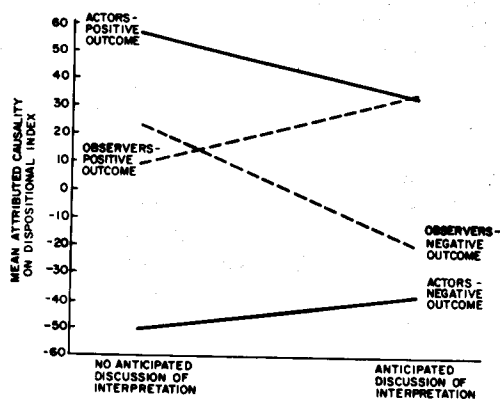


FIGURE 1

Mean attributions of causality on the dispositional index for experimental conditions. (Positive scores indicate dispositional direction; negative scores indicate situational direction.)

#### DISCUSSION

The current study replicated traditional actor-observer differences when subjects did not anticipate discussion. Specifically, for a behavior resulting in a negative outcome, actors attributed the causal locus of the outcome more to situational factors than did observers, while for a positive outcome, observers made stronger situational attributions than actors. However, when subjects were informed that they would be discussing an interpretation with a knowledgeable person who also observed the behavior, actor-observer perceptions of causality converged. The data indicate that, although there was some tendency for both actors and observers to moderate in anticipation of discussion, significant shifts were made by observers

but not actors. Recently, Cialdini *et al.* (1976) argued that moderation shifts for purposes of self-presentation are most likely to occur on issues of little personal relevance. When the issue is of little personal relevance, a discussant's own position on the topic becomes less salient than the presentation of a defensible position. Cialdini *et al.* (1976:664) provide evidence for the notion that when the topic is of high personal relevance, "a person's concern for appearances should be dwarfed by outcomes connected with the topic itself." In the current experiment, the topic for discussion was the behavior of the actor—an issue clearly more personally involving for actors than for observers. Thus, consistent with the Cialdini *et al.* (1976) notion that moderation is more likely on topics of low personal relevance, greater moderation tended to occur for observers than actors.

There is a second reason for observers shifting more than actors as a function of the anticipated discussion manipulation. Actors have knowledge of their own personal, nonlaboratory history and can cite multiple cases in which they were helpful, not helpful, etc. Thus, actors likely felt quite confident that they could defend their attributions in the subsequent discussion with the research trainee. Observers, however, were likely to perceive that they had less information than their anticipated discussant. This, in turn, enhanced their need to put effort into their interpretation (as indicated by the perceived effort finding) to obtain a cautious, defensible position. There are two possible ways to obtain a defensible position. One would be to shift from prior attributions toward a point of neutrality. It can be argued that a neutral position is to assign equal causality to situational and dispositional factors (i.e., zero on the dispositional index). Alternatively, a defensible position might be represented by a shift toward the more knowledgeable position, of actors, a position of which observers are aware (Stephan, 1975; Snyder *et al.*, 1976). The data tend to favor the latter interpretation, since observers of a positive outcome tend to shift away from zero on the dispositional index and toward the position of actors (albeit nonsignificantly).

### Conclusions

While employing a traditional, controlled experimental task in the actor-observer literature, the current study conceptually introduced a variable common to real-world situations—anticipated discussion. The results revealed that anticipated discussion with a knowledgeable person eliminates actor-observer differences in attributed causality.

We are not suggesting that divergent actor-observer perceptions of causality in relatively private, nonsocial situations are unimportant. Such attributions perhaps represent the private, undefended cognitions of the attributor. However, naturalistic settings seldom involve the laboratory-type situation of making a response that will not subsequently be a matter of dialogue with others. Instead, individuals anticipate discussion and other forms of interaction with others in which the interpretation of events are shared, often defended, and sometimes even abandoned. The current investigation suggests that actor-observer differences might be less pervasively observed in naturalistic public settings than in the laboratory.

In addition to calling the pervasiveness of actor-observer divergence into question, the current study challenges the recently popular information-processing explanation of such divergence (e.g., Miller and Ross, 1975). In the current study, the anticipated discussion manipulation was induced *subsequent* to the behavioral event. Thus, both the anticipated-discussion subjects and the no-anticipated-discussion subjects observed the same behavioral event with the same informational set. The ease with which subjects shifted their causal explanations suggests that the actor-observer divergence and convergence are more motivational (e.g., Snyder *et al.*, 1976) than informational.

### REFERENCES

- Cialdini, Robert, A. Levy, C. P. Herman, and S. Evenbeck  
1973 "Attitudinal politics: The strategy of mod-

- eration." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 25: 100-108.
- Cialdini, Robert, A. Levy, P. Herman, L. Kozlowski, and R. E. Petty  
1976 "Elastic shifts of opinion: Determinants of direction and durability." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34: 663-672.
- Harvey, John, R. Arkin, J. Gleason, and S. Johnston  
1974 "Effect of expected and observed outcome on an action and the differential causal attributions of actor and observer." *Journal of Personality* 42: 62-77.
- Hass, R. G.  
1975 "Persuasion or moderation? Two experiments on anticipatory belief change." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31:1155-1162.
- Hass, R. G., and R. W. Mann  
1976 "Anticipatory belief change: Persuasion or impression management?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34:105-111.
- Johnson, T. J., R. Feigenbaum, and M. Weigby  
1964 "Some determinants and consequences of the teacher's perception of causation." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 55:237-246.
- Jones, E. E., and R. E. Nisbett  
1972 "The actor and the observer: Divergent perceptions of the causes of behavior." In E. E. Jones *et al.* (eds.), *Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior*. Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Press.
- Miller, D. T., and M. Ross  
1975 "Self-serving biases in the attribution of causality: Fact or fiction?" *Psychological Bulletin* 82:213-225.
- Sherrod, D. R., and J. Farber  
1975 "The effect of previous actor/observer role experience on attribution of responsibility for failure." *Journal of Personality* 43:231-247.
- Snyder, M. L., W. G. Stephan, and D. Rosenfield  
1976 "Egotism and attribution." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 33:435-441.
- Stephen, W. G.  
1975 "Attributions to behavior with positive or negative outcomes and empathy for other role." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 11:205-214.
- Streufert, S., and S. C. Streufert  
1969 "Effects of conceptual structure, failure, and success on attribution of causality and interpersonal attitudes." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 11:138-147.
- Wolosin, R. J., S. J. Sherman, and A. Till  
1973 "Effects of cooperation and competition on responsibility attribution after success and failure." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 9:220-235.
- Wortman, C. B., P. R. Constanzo, and T. R. Witt  
1973 "Effect of anticipated performance on the attribution of causality to self and others." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27:372-381.