

Blurry Words and Fuzzy Deeds The Attribution of Obscure Behavior

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ABSTRACT

When people attempt to infer the existence of traits from another's behavior, they *categorize* the behavior, *characterize* the actor in trait terms, and then *correct* that inference with information about situational constraints. The 1st 2 stages require fewer attentional resources than does the 3rd. However, when behavior is obscure (i.e., difficult to categorize because its features are not easily apprehended), the 1st stage should consume resources on which the 3rd stage depends, and undercorrected inferences should result. In 2 experiments, behavior was made obscure by distorting its visual or acoustical parameters. Although the obscure behaviors could logically have been attributed to the constraining situations in which they occurred, Ss who observed such behaviors were especially unlikely to correct their trait characterizations of the actors.

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The study of behavioral perception must occasionally strike the layperson as an exercise in the obvious. After all, most of us have the experience of effortlessly reading the inner states of others from their overt behavior: Our interpretations of a knit brow, a coy smile, or an angry rebuke are drawn so quickly and easily that "typically they are not experienced as interpretations at all" ([Heider, 1958](#), p. 82). Although the identification of action is constrained by the action's context (a condemned prisoner's nervous laughter rarely means "I am having a dandy time"), by the action's effects on the environment (a boxer's kidney punch rarely means "I love you"), and by the actor's dispositions (the compliments of a notorious ingratiation rarely mean anything at all), these constraints are usually less than complete and thus leave ample room for interpretation. Just what a person is doing can, under many circumstances, be a matter of debate ([Ryle, 1949](#); [Taylor & Crocker, 1981](#); [Vallacher & Wegner, 1985](#); cf. [Baron, 1988](#); [McArthur & Baron, 1983](#)).

A variety of factors can alter the identification of a behavior, and [Trope \(1986\)](#) has developed an elegant model of how these alterations influence subsequent attributional work. In essence, the model argues that the identity one assigns to an action can govern the inferences one draws about the actor: Weeping will afford different inferences about an actor when it occurs at a wedding than at a funeral, and prior knowledge of these formal occasions may even change the perceived extremity of the emotional display. In short, the answer to "Why?" is conditioned by the answer to "What?" The trait-attribution model of [Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull \(1988\)](#) incorporates [Trope's \(1986\)](#) insight by postulating three conceptually distinct stages in the process of trait inference: *Categorization* of the behavior, *characterization* of the actor in trait terms, and *correction* of the trait inference with information about facilitative or inhibitory situational forces (see also [Quattrone, 1982](#)). Thus, the utterance "Nice to see you" may be categorized as an affable statement, the speaker may be characterized as having a genuine affinity for the recipient of the remark, and, finally, this inference may be corrected for the fact that the recipient is a powerful superior whose presence demands polite affability.

The key feature of this model is that the three stages are assumed to vary in the amount of conscious attention they require. Specifically, the correction stage is presumed to require more attentional resources than either the categorization or characterization stages and should thus be more easily impaired by competing cognitive demands. A variety of experiments have substantiated this prediction. For example, subjects who saw a woman behave anxiously under anxiety-provoking circumstances categorized the behavior as manifest anxiety, characterized the woman as dispositionally anxious, and then corrected this inference by taking into account the constraining circumstances of her behavior. However, when subjects were asked to perform simultaneously an additional resource-consuming task, they were much less likely to correct their characterizations. Although these "cognitively busy" subjects noticed and remembered the anxiety-provoking circumstances, they failed to use that information to institute correction and persisted in considering the woman dispositionally anxious ([Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988](#); see also [Gilbert, Krull, & Pelham, 1988](#); [Gilbert & Osborne, 1989](#)).

According to [Trope's \(1986\)](#) model, the categorization of an action may influence subsequent attributions by changing the information on which those attributions are predicated (e.g., perceived behavioral extremity). The [Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull \(1988\)](#) model suggests an additional route by which behavioral categorization may influence attribution. In previous tests of this model, extraneous tasks (e.g., digit rehearsal, visual scanning, and so on) were used to deplete perceivers' overall processing resources and, as the model predicted, this depletion led to failure at the fragile correction stage. The same logic suggests that if the relatively effortless categorization stage was somehow made more effortful, then correction could be similarly disrupted. In other words, obscure behavior (i.e., behavior that is difficult to categorize because its key features are difficult to apprehend) may pose an interpretive challenge that requires attention, and if attentional resources are used to meet this challenge, they may be unavailable for correction. Perceivers who are forced to deliberate about what an action *is* may have fewer attentional resources with which to ponder what the action *means* .

Categorization, then, may influence subsequent attributions not only by altering the information on which these attributions are based (as [Trope's \[1986\]](#) model predicts and research has shown) but also by siphoning off attentional resources that are necessary for the completion of attributional processing. Two experiments tested hypothesis this.

Experiment 1

Method Overview

Subjects watched a silent videotape of an anxious-looking female target who was having a discussion with a stranger. Half the subjects learned that the target was discussing an anxiety-provoking topic (her sexual fantasies), and the remaining subjects learned that the target was discussing a mundane topic (her ideal vacation). Half the subjects in each of these conditions watched a normal videotape (easy categorization), and the remaining subjects watched a visually degraded videotape in which the target's behavior was obscured (difficult categorization). After viewing the videotape, subjects estimated the level of the target's trait anxiety. (Most of the procedures and measures in this experiment were used previously by [Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988](#) , and [Gilbert & Osborne, 1989](#) .)

Subjects

Subjects were 34 female students at the University of Texas at Austin who participated to fulfill a requirement in their introductory psychology course. All subjects had normal, near normal, or corrected-to-normal vision. Only native speakers of English were eligible to participate.

Instructions

On arrival at the laboratory, subjects were greeted by a male experimenter who gave them a brief oral introduction to the experiment, provided them with complete written

instructions, and then escorted each subject to a cubicle (equipped with video monitor) where she remained for the duration of the experiment.

The written instructions explained that subjects would be asked to watch a short clip from a videotape of a getting-acquainted conversation that had ostensibly taken place earlier in the year. This conversation was alleged to have been part of a project on the role of discussion topics in friendship formation. Subjects were told that two unacquainted female students had been assigned to discuss 1 of 10 different topics for about 5 min and that subjects would be seeing a short (approximately 20 s) clip from that conversation. It was explained that during the getting-acquainted conversation the camera had been positioned behind one of the discussants, and thus only one of the discussants (the target) would be visible on the videotape.

Manipulation of Situational Constraints

Subjects were shown a list of the 10 potential discussion topics (dual career couples, scary movies, drug testing, health and nutrition, sexual fantasies, ideal vacations, humiliating accidents, student housing, women in art, and interracial dating). Subjects were told that, to protect the privacy of the discussants, the videotape would be shown without any sound, but that they would be able to tell which of the 10 topics was being discussed because the topic would appear in subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

All subjects were shown a video clip in which the target appeared extremely anxious and uneasy.¹ Half the subjects were randomly assigned to the *anxious topic* condition. In this condition, the subtitle indicated that the target was discussing an anxiety-provoking topic (i.e., her sexual fantasies). The remaining subjects were assigned to the *mundane topic* condition. In this condition subjects saw precisely the same behavior that was seen by subjects in the anxious topic condition. However, in this condition, the subtitle indicated that the target was discussing a mundane topic (i.e., her ideal vacation). In the anxious topic condition, then, the target's behavioral anxiety could logically be attributed to the nature of the topic she was discussing and thus was not necessarily indicative of dispositional anxiety; in the mundane topic condition, however, the same behavior could not logically have been caused by the nature of the discussion topic and thus was an excellent indicator of dispositional anxiety.

Manipulation of Behavioral Obscurity

Half the subjects were randomly assigned to the *normal behavior* condition. Subjects in this condition were shown a high-quality videotape that was free of visual noise. The remaining subjects were assigned to the *obscure behavior* condition. Subjects in this condition were shown a videotape that had been visually degraded by misadjusting the tracking mechanisms on two videocassette recorders and then using those machines to make successive copies of the master tape. The final fourth generation tape had a great deal of visual noise (streaking, blurring, color dropout, and snow), which interrupted the flow of the action and obscured some of its details. It is important to note that the subtitle

was inserted only *after* the videotape had been visually degraded; as such, the subtitles on both the normal and degraded tapes were equally legible.

Dependent Measures

Subjects rated the target's dispositional anxiety on four 13-point bipolar scales that were anchored at the endpoints with the phrases (a) *is probably comfortable (uncomfortable) in social situations*, (b) *is a calm (nervous) sort of person*, (c) *is generally relaxed (anxious) with people*, and (d) *is (not) easily embarrassed*. Each scale was preceded by the phrase, "When I think about how the woman in the film actually is in her day to day life, I think she..."

Procedure

Before the experiment began, subjects were shown a silent, 20-s, visually normal practice tape of a woman (not the target) sitting in a room, and they were then given an opportunity to rate that woman on the trait-anxiety measures. This enabled subjects to become familiar with both the procedure and the dependent measures. After the practice tape was over, the experimenter started the experimental tape. Subjects watched a 20-s clip of an anxious-looking woman (the target) who was apparently engaged in conversation with an off-screen partner. When the tape ended, subjects were allowed up to 30 s to rate the target on the four trait-anxiety measures. At the end of the experiment all subjects were asked to recall the discussion topic. Finally, subjects were debriefed and dismissed.

Results and Discussion

We expected that subjects who viewed obscure behavior would make correspondent inferences about the target and that subjects who viewed normal behavior would not. Ratings on the four trait-anxiety scales were averaged to create a trait-anxiety index. The omission of the *embarrassment* item improved the reliability of this index (coefficient α changed from .79 to .84), and thus the item was deleted. The three-item index was submitted to a 2 (topic: anxiety-provoking or mundane) \times 2 (behavior quality: normal or obscure) analysis of variance (ANOVA), which revealed a main effect of topic, $F(1, 30) = 6.95, p < .01$, and a main effect of behavior quality, $F(1, 30) = 7.69, p < .01$. These main effects were qualified by the predicted Topic \times Behavior Quality interaction, $F(1, 30) = 6.30, p < .05$. As [Table 1](#) shows, subjects who saw normal behavior considered the anxious-looking target to be more trait-anxious when she was discussing a mundane rather than an anxiety-provoking topic. In contrast, subjects who saw obscure behavior considered the target to be equally trait-anxious regardless of the topic she discussed. In short, subjects who should have found the target's behavior easy to categorize showed evidence of having used the discussion topics to correct their characterizations of the target, whereas subjects who should have found the behavior difficult to categorize did not.

Our own viewing of the degraded videotape left us confident that the target's behavioral anxiety was obscure but, with a bit of effort, detectable. Still, one might wonder whether subjects who saw that videotape could actually detect the anxious behavior at all. The magnitude of the ratings leaves little doubt that subjects did ultimately observe considerable state anxiety. Subjects who saw a degraded videotape rated the target as very anxious (i.e., well above the midpoint of the scale) and, in fact, made ratings that were indistinguishable from the ratings of subjects who saw a normal videotape that was subtitled with a mundane topic. In addition, all subjects recalled the discussion topic that the target had ostensibly been discussing, indicating that they had noticed and remembered this information, too.

Experiment 2

The results of Experiment 1 suggest that when an action cannot be categorized unthinkingly, perceivers will devote attentional resources to the task and thus have fewer resources with which to correct their characterizations of the actor. As provocative as this initial finding may be, it is far from conclusive. First, because the target's behavior was held constant and the presence of situational constraints was manipulated, we predicted no difference between the attributions of the two groups of subjects who viewed obscure behavior. There are, of course, always several reasons why two experimental conditions might yield equivalent data, and a bolder procedure entails manipulating the nature of the target's behavior and predicting a *larger* difference for subjects exposed to obscure rather than normal versions of that behavior. In Experiment 2 we did just that. Second, Experiment 1 provided no evidence to indicate which stage of processing (the initial categorization of the behavior or the subsequent attributional correction) was affected by behavioral obscurity. In the second part of Experiment 2, we confronted this issue directly. Finally, we hoped to show that the phenomenon demonstrated in Experiment 1 transcended experimental particulars; as such, Experiment 2 used verbal (rather than nonverbal) behavior and examined attributions of attitude (rather than emotion).

Method Overview

Female subjects listened to an audio recording of a "dating game" in which a male contestant answered "loaded questions" posed by a female questioner. The wording of the woman's questions clearly indicated that she preferred men who had either a traditional or modern sex role orientation, and the man always made claims that were consistent with the woman's preference. Half the subjects in each of these conditions listened to a normal version of the tape, and the remaining subjects listened to an acoustically degraded version. All subjects then attempted to estimate the male contestant's true sex role attitudes.

Subjects

Seventy-eight female students at the University of Texas at Austin participated to fulfill a requirement in their introductory psychology course. Only native speakers of English were eligible to participate.

Instructions

On arrival at the laboratory, subjects were greeted by a female experimenter who gave them a brief oral introduction to the experiment, provided them with complete written instructions, and then escorted each subject to a cubicle equipped with headphones that were connected to a tape player in another room. The instructions explained that the experimenter was interested in "the process by which people form impressions of others—in particular, how women form impressions of men."

Subjects were told that they would listen to a brief audio recording of two college students who were playing "the dating game." Ostensibly, this recording had been made as part of an earlier experiment in which male students had attempted to win a date with an attractive female student. Subjects were told that their task was to listen to an excerpt from this dating game and then make judgments about the male contestant's true attitudes toward women and their roles in society. Subjects were reminded that "male contestants are often willing to bend the truth a little bit in order to get a date with an attractive female."

Manipulation of Target's Behavior

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two target-behavior conditions. In the *traditional* condition, subjects heard the woman ask questions in which she expressed a strong preference for men with traditional sex role orientations (e.g., "I like it when men come after me, and not the other way around. Who do you think should do the asking out?"), and they then heard the man indicate that he possessed such an orientation (e.g., "I like to be the one to ask a girl out"). In the *modern* condition, the woman's questions betrayed a clear preference for men with modern sex role orientations (e.g., "When I see something or someone I want, I go after it. Who do you think should do the asking out?"), and the man then indicated that he possessed such an orientation (e.g., "I admire a woman who's not afraid to make the first move"). In both conditions, then, a male target made self-descriptive claims that were entirely consistent with the constraints of the leading questions he was being asked (see [Ginzler, Jones, & Swann, 1987](#); [Swann, Giuliano, & Wegner, 1982](#)).

Manipulation of Behavioral Obscurity

Half the subjects were randomly assigned to the *normal behavior* condition. These subjects listened to a recording of the dating game that was played at a fairly high volume so that the recording was extremely easy to hear. The remaining subjects were assigned to the *obscure behavior* condition. These subjects listened to a recording in which the man's constrained responses (but *not* the woman's constraining questions) were acoustically degraded by lowering the volume to a just audible level. In the normal behavior condition, one could not help but clearly hear the man's responses, but in the obscure behavior condition, one had to concentrate rather intensely to hear precisely what he said. Subjects in the obscure behavior condition were asked to forgive the fact that a short circuit in the man's microphone had caused the poor recording of his responses.

Dependent Measures Global trait measures.

Subjects rated the male target on three 13-point bipolar scales that were preceded by the phrase "I think the male contestant has ..." and were anchored at the endpoints with the phrases (a) *very traditional (progressive) attitudes toward women*, (b) *very conservative (liberal) attitudes about relationships*, and (c) *very old-fashioned (modern) attitudes about dating*. These scales were intended to assess subjects' global impressions of the male target's sex role orientation.

Specific trait measures.

Subjects rated the male target on 10 items taken from the Marital Relations (Male Form) Subscale of the Male—Female Relations Questionnaire (MFRQ; [Spence, Helmreich, & Sawin, 1980](#)). The MFRQ requires subjects to respond to each item on a 5-point bipolar scale that is anchored at the endpoints with the phrases *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. Subjects estimated the male target's agreement with 10 statements that were chosen for their face validity. All of the items were phrased such that agreement indicated a traditional sex role orientation (e.g. "I would expect to be head of the house simply because I'm a man"). These items were intended to assess subjects' specific impressions of the male target's sex role orientation.

Experimental checks.

Three experimental checks were made at the end of the session. First, subjects were asked whether they had normal, slightly impaired, or highly impaired hearing. Second, subjects were asked to report how difficult it had been for them to hear the audiotape on a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *not at all difficult* to *very difficult*. Third, subjects were shown two of the woman's questions and were asked to recognize the gist of the man's response. So, for example, subjects read "When the female asked 'Who do you think should do the asking out, men or women?' the male said that (a) *men should do the asking* or (b) *women should do the asking*." Subjects were asked to choose one of these responses or to state that they did not know which of these responses was correct. This measure ensured that only subjects who had heard and understood the audiotape would be included in the analyses.

Procedure

Subjects listened to an audiotape in which a male contestant was subtly urged to claim either a modern or traditional sex role orientation. The audiotape was either acoustically normal or degraded. Subjects then completed the global trait measures (three trait scales), the specific trait measures (10 MFRQ items), and the experimental checks. Finally, subjects were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and dismissed.²

Results and Discussion Experimental Checks

All subjects reported having normal or near normal hearing. However, given routine variation in the auditory acuity of subjects, we expected that some subjects in the obscure behavior condition might actually fail to hear the audiotape altogether and thus respond randomly when presented with the dependent measures. In fact, 13 subjects failed to recall the gist of the male target's verbal responses (i.e., they failed an extremely easy two-item recognition memory test), and these subjects were excluded from all analyses. Although inclusion of such subjects adds random noise to the data and thus decreases the significance levels of the effects, it has virtually no effect on the pattern of results. Finally, a 2 (target's response: traditional or modern) \times 2 (behavior quality: normal or obscure) ANOVA revealed that subjects in the normal behavior condition found the audiotapes much easier to hear than did subjects in the obscure behavior condition ($M_s = 0.03$ and 2.12 , respectively on a 0- to 3-point scale), $F(1, 61) = 271.92, p < .001$.

Global Trait Measures

The three trait scales were averaged to create a global sex role orientation index, and this index was submitted to ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of target's response, $F(1, 61) = 4.06, p < .05$, and the expected Target's response \times Behavior Quality interaction, $F(1, 61) = 3.14, p = .08$ (means are shown in the top portion of [Table 2](#)). Planned comparisons revealed that subjects who heard obscure behavior made correspondent inferences about the target, $t(61) = 2.68, p < .01$, whereas subjects who heard normal behavior did not, $t < 1$. In other words, subjects who were forced to devote considerable attention to categorizing the target's behavior as traditional or modern were especially unlikely to correct their corresponding characterizations of the target's attitude. Indeed, there was a significant positive correlation between difficulty of categorization (i.e., answers to the question "How difficult was it to hear the tape?") and the tendency to draw correspondent inferences about the target, $r(63) = .20, p = .05$. This correlation is especially impressive because difficulty of categorization was only roughly assessed by self-report, and people are known to be quite poor at reporting accurately on such mental operations (e.g., [Jacoby, Kelley, & Dywan, 1989](#); [Nisbett & Wilson, 1977](#)).

It is worth noting that in both this and the previous experiment, subjects who observed normal behavior showed no evidence of correspondence bias. This may surprise those who consider the correspondence bias an unrelenting phenomenon, but, in fact, the bias has failed to appear in any number of classic studies. For example, [Jones, Davis, and Gergen \(1961\)](#) asked subjects to make inferences about a job applicant who claimed to have the temperament for a desirable job, and subjects showed no evidence of correspondence bias. [Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz's \(1977\)](#) well-known experiment is often cited as an example of correspondence bias, but a close reading shows that quizmasters showed no such effect. Indeed, it is now clear that subjects can be expected to show little or no bias when they are held accountable for their inferences ([Tetlock, 1985](#)), when they discuss their judgments with others ([Wright & Wells, 1985](#)), when a familiar target is highly motivated to convey his or her true dispositions ([Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990](#)), when subjects attend primarily to the nonverbal behavior of a "leaky" target ([Gilbert & Krull, 1988](#)), when the target is distinctly unenthusiastic ([Jones, Worchel, Goethals, & Grumet, 1971](#)), and when the dependent

measures stray too far from the target's behavior ([Cantor, Pittman, & Jones, 1982](#) ; [Sumpton & Gregson, 1981](#)). Laboratory experimentation is, of course, meant to demonstrate possibilities and not to provide actuarial information; thus, one simply cannot say how often the correspondence bias emerges in day-to-day life and how often it is attenuated by other factors. What is known is that there are a number of variables that promote and inhibit the bias, and knowledge of these variables is critical to an understanding of the bias itself.

Specific Trait Measures

Subjects' ratings of the target on the 10 MFRQ items were averaged to create a specific sex role orientation index. This 10-item index was submitted to ANOVA, which revealed only the expected Target's Response \times Behavior Quality interaction, $F(1, 61) = 8.50, p < .01$. As the lower portion of [Table 2](#) shows, subjects who heard obscure behavior made correspondent inferences about the target, $t(61) = 1.96, p = .05$, whereas subjects who heard normal behavior did not. ³

Which Stage of Processing Was Affected?

The results of Experiment 2 are consistent with the hypothesis that difficult categorization can impair subsequent attributional correction; however, they are also consistent with the alternative hypothesis that difficult categorization affects the categorization stage rather than the subsequent correction stage of processing. It is possible, for example, that behavioral obscurity simply caused subjects to perceive the target's responses as extreme (i.e., especially liberal or conservative). As such, subjects who observed obscure behavior would be expected to make more extreme attributions about the target even if they *did* perform adequate attributional correction, simply because their initial perceptions of the behavior were "perceptually inflated" (see [Trope, 1986](#) ; [Trope, Cohen, & Maoz, 1988](#)).

To rule out this alternative hypothesis, we asked 54 female subjects to participate in a replication of Experiment 2. However, this time we told the subjects that the male target was a paid actor and that their job was simply to determine how well he played his part. In particular, subjects were asked to rate the target's behavior, rather than his disposition, on three global dimensions (*traditional/progressive, conservative/liberal, and old-fashioned/modern*). The results of this follow-up experiment strongly supported our original (and not the alternative) hypothesis. Subjects considered the obscure behavior much more difficult to hear than the normal behavior, $M s = 2.18$ and 0.00 , respectively; $F(1, 44) = 188.88, p < .001$. Nine of the 54 subjects showed imperfect memory for the target's behavior and were thus excluded from all analyses. (It is comforting to note that this was precisely the same proportion as failed the memory test in Experiment 2.) The remaining subjects' ratings on the three scales were highly reliable (coefficient $\alpha = .88$) and were thus averaged to create a behavioral perception index. An ANOVA on this index revealed only a main effect of target's response: Subjects thought that the modern target made much more progressive, liberal, and modern statements than did the traditional target, $M s = 6.46$ and 8.71 , respectively; $F(1, 41) = 14.61, p < .001$. Behavior

quality had absolutely no main or interactive effects on these judgments (both F 's < 1). In addition, self-reported difficulty during categorization was completely uncorrelated with the perceived extremity of the behavior, $r(43) = .07, ns$. In short, behavioral obscurity affected subjects' attributions about the target but did not affect their perceptions of the target's behavior.

This finding should not be seen as undermining the validity of [Trope's \(1986\)](#) model. That model suggests that when behavior is ambiguous, information about situational constraints will be used in resolving this ambiguity; thus, knowing that tears (ambiguous behavioral features) are being shed at a wedding (happy situation) rather than at a funeral (sad situation) may cause perceivers to identify the behavior as especially joyous. Why, then, didn't knowledge of situational constraints (e.g., the modern woman's leading questions) affect our subjects' perceptions of the male target's responses (e.g., cause them to perceive his responses as especially liberal)? The key, we believe, lies in the difference between *ambiguous* and *obscure* behavior. Ambiguous behavior is behavior in which clearly identifiable indicators (e.g., tears) may signal more than one inner state (e.g., joy or sadness). Obscure behavior, on the other hand, is behavior in which indicators are difficult to identify ("What's she doing with her hands?"), but once identified ("Oh. I see. She's biting her nails") can be reasonably interpreted to indicate only one inner state ("She must be nervous"). In short, behavioral ambiguity and obscurity are not the same thing, and thus Trope's model does not (in our view) make predictions that run counter to our findings.

General Discussion

People are rarely stumped by the question "What is that fellow doing?" Actions generally speak for themselves, and most of us are able to categorize the behaviors of others with an ease that may occasionally belie the intricate nature of that process. Yet, one need only miss a key phrase in a colleague's talk, or look away from a film at a critical moment, to be reminded of how fragile the understanding of action can be. When a momentary distraction causes that understanding to collapse, conscious attention must be called on to guide its reconstruction.

The present studies demonstrate some of the consequences of calling on conscious attention in this way. When attention is devoted to the categorization of behavior, it cannot fuel the effortful components of the attributional analysis. As such, only the relatively effortless components of that analysis are completed, and strong dispositional characterizations are the result. In short, the contemplation of *what* may undermine the discovery of *why*. Rather than reiterate the theoretical implications of this finding, we will close by discussing some traditional questions on which it may have some bearing.

Understanding the Unfamiliar

When individuals interact with members of other races, genders, and nationalities, they often draw more dispositional inferences from those behaviors than from the identical behaviors of their cohort. People think of out-groups in simple ways and are thus overly

influenced by the unrepresentative actions of their members ([Linville & Jones, 1980](#) ; [Quattrone & Jones, 1980](#)). In addition, unfamiliarity with the norms that govern an out-group member's behavior may not allow us to estimate the consensus that such actions enjoy. We may assume, for example, that an Israeli acquaintance is particularly bold without realizing that close physical proximity is a Middle Eastern custom and, as such, reveals little about the acquaintance as a unique individual.

Our research suggests an additional mechanism by which such effects may be produced. Despite the universality of spontaneous emotional expressions ([Ekman, 1971](#)), some attitudes and emotions *are* displayed by different cultures in different ways. A Brit may affect a stoic smile when unhappy, a Japanese may nod despite strenuous disagreement, and even members of familiar subcultures may use words in ways that confound their usual meaning ("That saxophone player is really *bad* "). Even when an outsider knows these display rules, it is likely that their application requires considerable thought ("Let's see, if *hot* is *cool* and *bad* is *good*, then *radical* must mean ..."). To the extent that out-groups attach different behavioral signs to the thing being signified, then passing from the former to the latter may be something of a labor. One reason why we draw dispositional inferences about out-group members, then, may be that we work hard to understand what they are doing and are thus unable to give much thought to why they are doing it.

Categorization by Actors and Observers

[Jones and Nisbett \(1972\)](#) suggested that there is "a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute *the same actions* to stable personal dispositions" (p. 80, italics added). Despite some notable exceptions ([Monson & Snyder, 1977](#)), this simple proposition has proved enormously reliable and robust. One explanation of the effect is that actors and observers assign different identities to the actor's behavior. Actors often have "inside information" that may enable them to construe their behavior in ways that an observer might not. Whereas an observer may think of *eating meat loaf* as an expression of hunger, the actor may know that *eating Aunt Shirley's meat loaf* is an act of duty and sacrifice. As such, actors and observers may occasionally make different attributions because they are, in fact, making attributions for different behaviors (cf. [Kahneman & Miller, 1986](#)).

But even when actors and observers do agree about the identity of an action, it seems reasonable to suggest that actors will generally find it easier to categorize their own behavior than will observers. Knowledge of present intent and past behavior may enable the actor to make sense of actions that would initially strike an uninformed observer as quite anomalous. The person who places a rubber chicken on a friend's grave certainly knows that this was the favorite prop of the departed comedian, but an uninformed observer will have to work particularly hard to understand an offering of a silly toy. Our experiments suggest that the payoff for the observer's hard work may be an undercorrected dispositional inference about the actor. The divergent attributions of actors and observers may be, at least in part, a consequence of the relative difficulty each has in determining just what behavior it is that needs attributing.

Hidden Meaning of Action

Experimental psychologists have long considered clinical judgment to be something of a slow-moving target. In addition to having undue confidence in their judgments ([Oskamp, 1965](#)) and perceiving relations where none exist ([Chapman & Chapman, 1967](#)), psychodynamic therapists have also been accused of showing a profound bias toward dispositional explanations of human behavior. As [Nisbett and Ross \(1980, p. 244\)](#) remarked, "Freud risked elevating the fundamental attribution error to the status of a scientific principle."

Although it is difficult to gauge the pervasiveness of this dispositional bias, one line of reasoning suggests that the bias is a natural consequence of the clinical task. The goal of most insight therapies is to identify a person's behavior in ways that the person might not. A client may claim that she is *visiting her mother every Tuesday* and *taking a class in quantum mechanics*, but the therapist's job is to discover the transcendental connection that allows both actions to be similarly construed. Clinicians must certainly exert considerable effort to uncover the single category to which apparently disparate behaviors belong; it is no meager insight to realize that frequent visits with a critical parent and enrollment in a demanding seminar may both be subtle means of undermining one's sense of self-worth.

Our research suggests that because such categorizations are difficult to achieve, clinicians may be able to devote less thought to the situational antecedents of the behaviors that they have categorized. Ironically, it may be the clinician's shrewd categorization of action that casts a somewhat dispositional pale on the analysis of its causes. Our studies suggest that observers should be inclined to draw dispositional inferences for those actions whose "hidden meanings" challenge discovery. In fact, the more deeply obscured the meaning of behavior, the more likely observers should be to embrace a dispositional explanation for it—a speculation that brings whole schools of psychotherapy to mind.

Conclusion

A popular bit of graffiti has it that "time is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once." In a similar vein, it might be said that consciousness is nature's way of keeping people from thinking all their thoughts at the same time. Indeed, the most fundamental limit of consciousness is that it takes but a single object, and thus thinking about one thing necessarily precludes thinking about another. Drawing inferences from human behavior is no exception to this rule: To the extent that we stop to ponder one aspect of a person's behavior, we may be prevented from considering another aspect, and our ultimate understanding of the person may therefore be incomplete. The present experiments suggest that when *what* becomes a tough question, social perceivers may never ask *why*.

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1

Two different actresses were used as targets. Approximately half the subjects in each condition saw one actress, and the remaining subjects saw the other. The identity of the actress had no effect on any of the analyses to be reported and is not discussed further.

2

It may be useful to keep in mind that subjects in this and the previous experiment observed behavior that was dynamic and ongoing. In such situations, a subject may be thought of as executing the categorize—characterize—correct sequence with each new quantum of behavior. When the categorization stage takes too much capacity (i.e., time or attention), the subject should not be able to execute the correction stage before she has to go back and execute the categorization stage again for the next behavioral quantum.

3

In fact, subjects who heard normal behavior showed an unexpected reversal, $t(61) = 2.10, p < .05$. This reversal was due primarily to ratings on two items that described emotional displays: (a) *I think I should be emotionally stronger and tougher than my wife* and (b) *I expect my wife to be more emotionally dependent on me than I am on her*. These items (and no others) mapped directly on to one of the modern target's responses and thus caused subjects to infer that the modern target had a traditional attitude toward emotional displays. Indeed, an ANOVA performed on an eight-item index that excluded these two MFRQ items revealed only the expected Target's Response \times Behavior Quality interaction, $F(1, 61) = 8.25, p < .01$. Most important, the unexpected reversal was no longer reliable, $t(61) = 1.57, p > .12$.

Table 1
Ratings of Target's Trait Anxiety: Experiment 1

Discussion topic	Behavior quality	
	Obscure	Normal
Mundane	9.70	9.54
Anxiety-provoking	9.62	6.37
Difference	0.08	3.17

Note. Higher values indicate greater perceived trait anxiety on a 1- to 13-point scale.

Table 2
*Ratings of Target's Global and Specific Sex Role
 Orientation: Experiment 2*

Target's behavior	Behavior quality	
	Obscure	Normal
Global sex role orientation		
Traditional	8.55	7.40
Modern	6.73	7.29
Difference	1.82	0.11
Specific sex role orientation		
Traditional	3.71	3.41
Modern	3.32	3.83
Difference	0.39	-0.42

Note. Higher values indicate a more traditional sex role orientation on both scales. The global index used a 1- to 13-point scale, and the specific index used a 1- to 5-point scale.