

Secondhand Information and Social Judgment

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This research investigates how secondhand impressions of other people differ from those based on firsthand information. It was hypothesized that secondhand impressions are often more extreme because secondhand accounts of another person's actions frequently fail to convey adequately the role of mitigating circumstances and situational constraints in producing that person's behavior. Experiments 1 and 2 tested this hypothesis by exposing "first generation" subjects to information about a target person, having them rate the target on several trait and attribution scales, and having them describe the target person's actions to a group of "second generation" subjects. As predicted, second generation subjects made more extreme ratings of the target than their first generation counterparts. Content analyses of the accounts transmitted by first generation subjects indicated that they did indeed underemphasize various situational qualifications of the target persons' behavior. Experiment 3 extended these findings by demonstrating that people's impressions of someone they have often heard about from a friend (but never met) are more extreme than their friends' more informed impressions.

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Many of our impressions of other people are based entirely on secondhand information. We often have strong opinions about the personalities of famous people we have read about but never met. We may have vivid impressions of our partners' former lovers, although we are generally more than happy to avoid making their acquaintance. We like or dislike the friends and relatives of our closest friends, although we may know them solely through the nostalgic praise or frequent criticism put forward by our friends.

Given the pervasiveness of secondhand impressions, it is important to consider how they differ from impressions based on firsthand information. As a starting assumption, secondhand impressions are probably less

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accurate generally than those formed firsthand. Firsthand impressions are usually based on *more* information, and more *reliable* information, than those formed secondhand. But beyond this initial assumption that secondhand impressions are less accurate in some unpredictable direction, is there any reason to suspect that they differ *systematically* from those based on firsthand information? I believe that there is.

In particular, secondhand impressions may often be more extreme than those based on firsthand information. Learning about another person's actions secondhand may lead to a simpler and "cleaner" impression of that person. Such impressions may be relatively unaffected by considerations of how the person's actions may have been elicited or constrained by various situational determinants. If so, then hearing about people's behavior secondhand may lead us to consider their behavior to be more of a reflection of their "real" selves. We may thus make more internal attributions and stronger trait inferences after hearing about a person's actions secondhand than after witnessing those actions ourselves.

One reason for this hypothesis involves the kind of descriptions of another person's actions that we are likely to hear secondhand. Previous research has shown that transmitted messages tend to emphasize the gist of a body of information at the expense of specific details (Allport & Postman, 1947; Bartlett, 1932). The main point of what the communicator construes to be the "story" is *sharpened*, whereas elements not considered central are *leveled*. The main thesis of this paper is that when *social* information—or information about people and their actions—is transmitted, the speaker tends to emphasize information about the action and the actor and to downplay information about the context in which the action took place. More often than not, it seems, descriptions of social actions tend to be organized around the person rather than the situation. Why might this be the case?

As any attribution researcher would acknowledge, actions and actors form a psychological "unit" more easily than actions and environments (Heider, 1944; Quattrone, 1982). Therefore it may seem more "natural" in most cases to construct an account of a person's actions that makes greater reference to the type of person involved than to the nature of the surrounding circumstances. It is also probably *easier* to construct such accounts: although people and their actions can often be described in the same terminology, situations and actions usually cannot (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). When social information is transmitted, then, it may be the person that is usually sharpened and the situation that is leveled.

Of course, the same factors that lead firsthand observers to give person-oriented accounts of another person's actions also influence their own initial judgments about that person. Firsthand observers themselves commit the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977; Nisbett and Ross, 1980).

Thus, it may seem unlikely that secondhand observers would make even stronger dispositional inferences about the person described. However, firsthand observers are at least exposed to the situational constraints that may have affected the target person's behavior and their judgments may reflect this exposure to some extent. Secondhand observers, on the other hand, are never even exposed to much of this information.

To a certain extent, the present prediction about secondhand social judgments might also be derived from the literature on "cognitive tuning" (Brock & Fromkin, 1968; Cohen, 1961; Harkins, Harvey, Keithly, & Rich, 1977; Harvey, Harkins, & Kagehiro, 1976; Leventhal, 1962; Zajonc, 1960). The research in that area has been concerned with how a person's cognitive representation of a body of information is affected by his or her role in the communication process. The general paradigm used to examine this question is one in which two groups of subjects are exposed—*firsthand*—to the same information. One group processes this information with the expectation that they will subsequently have to transmit it to someone else, and the other group does so with the expectation that they will receive additional information on the topic from another person. The typical finding is that the "transmitters" develop more unified and polarized representations of the information than do the "receivers." (Note, however, that in these experiments no information is ever actually transmitted from one subject to another.)

This result has obvious implications for the present thesis: Although never discussed in the cognitive tuning literature, it certainly seems plausible that in actual communications between transmitters and receivers, the transmitters may pass on their polarized representations of the target information. Because the recipients, or secondhand observers, would then have access only to such "sanitized" versions of the original information, we might expect their judgments about whatever target stimuli were described to them to be relatively polarized.¹ Thus, the processes of cognitive tuning may contribute to the hypothesized tendency for secondhand impressions of other people to be more extreme than those based on firsthand information. But beyond this initial compatibility, however, there are several ways in which the general thesis I am proposing differs from and goes beyond the ideas presented in the cognitive tuning

¹ To some, the findings reported in the cognitive tuning literature may seem *inconsistent* with the present hypothesis. If firsthand observers themselves develop polarized representations of a target person and his or her actions, then there may be very little "room" for secondhand observers' impressions of the target to be even more extreme. However, one could argue (as I have argued above) that firsthand observers are at least exposed to all of the complexity of the original stimulus information. Thus, firsthand observers' own polarized representations of the target person may be offset by this additional information to some extent. Secondhand observers, on the other hand, receive only the polarized accounts of the stimulus information and could thus be expected to form more polarized views of the target.

literature. A complete discussion of these differences will be presented after the results of the present experiments have been reported.

The present research examines whether people do indeed tend to make more dispositional attributions and stronger trait inferences about another person when they hear about that person's actions secondhand. The first two studies attempt to document this phenomenon and trace its origin to the kind of descriptions of a person's actions that are provided by firsthand observers. The third study investigates an important "every day" implication of this phenomenon by examining people's secondhand impressions of individuals they know solely through the comments of a mutual friend.

EXPERIMENT 1

This experiment directly tested the present thesis by comparing the trait ratings and attributions made by firsthand and secondhand observers. "First generation" subjects watched a videotape of a target person describing two bad things that he or she had done in the past, rated the target on a set of trait and attribution scales, and then provided a tape-recorded account of what they had seen. Each second generation subject listened to one of these secondhand accounts and then made the same trait and attribution ratings. It was expected that the second generation subjects would make stronger dispositional attributions and more extreme trait inferences than first generation subjects.

Method

The subjects were 22 male and 34 female volunteers enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Cornell University. All subjects were run individually.

First generation subjects were shown one of two videotapes, one with a male target person and the other with a female. The videotapes began with a voice off camera asking the target person to describe a bad deed ("something you are not too proud of") that he or she had done in the past. The targets—confederates of the experimenter—were coached beforehand to include not only detailed descriptions of their bad deeds, but also various situational forces and mitigating circumstances that were partially responsible for them. After they described their first bad deed, the same voice off camera asked them to relate another such incident. The events described by the male stimulus person were a time he abruptly terminated his relationship with his girlfriend and a time he deliberately killed his brother's tropical fish. Those of the female stimulus person were a time she betrayed her friend's confidence and a time she failed to help her aunt in a moment of need.

After watching one of these videotapes, first generation subjects rated the target person on the following trait dimensions: good/bad, generous/selfish, helpful/hurtful, sensitive/insensitive, commendable/deplorable, and likeable/unlikeable. These ratings were made on 7-point scales with the negative term at one end of the scale (-3), the positive term at the other end (+3), and "neither" at the midpoint of the scale (0). The subjects also rated, on separate 9-point scales, the extent to which the target's behavior exemplifying each of these traits was due to personal versus situational causes.

After completing their ratings, these subjects were asked to recount what they had seen on the videotape in a tape-recorded message that would be played for a second generation

TABLE 1
MEAN TRAIT AND ATTRIBUTION RATINGS MADE BY FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION
SUBJECTS

	Rater		Difference
	First generation	Second generation	
Trait ratings			
Target person A	-5.71	-9.78	-4.07*
Target person B	-3.21	-5.00	-1.79
<i>M</i>	-4.46	-7.39	-2.93**
Attribution ratings			
Target person A	20.64	30.36	9.72*
Target person B	25.21	29.93	4.72
<i>M</i>	22.92	30.14	7.22**

Note. The individual scores that comprise the mean trait ratings are sums of six trait ratings on bi-polar scales that range from -3 to +3. The negative term of each bi-polar trait dimension (e.g., selfish) always occupied the negative end of the scale. Thus, greater negative numbers indicate stronger negative ratings. The attribution ratings are based on the sums of six attribution ratings made on 9-point scales, with higher numbers indicating greater dispositional attributions.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

subject. Specifically, they were told to "try to provide an account that would allow someone listening to the tape to determine what this person did and what this person was like" and to "provide as vivid and rich an account as possible. Remember, someone else will listen to the account you have given and they will be asked to rate the [target] person on the same scales that you have. Make sure that your account puts him or her in a position to be able to do so." To minimize disfluencies and incoherent narratives, the subjects were allowed to write an outline of what they wanted to say before taping their account.

The tape made by each first generation subject was subsequently played for one second generation subject (not necessarily of the same sex), creating a matched-pairs design. The second generation subject then rated the target person on the same trait and attribution scales.

Results

In this and all subsequent experiments, no significant effects of sex of subject were observed. As a consequence, this variable will receive no further discussion.

Primary dependent measures. The six trait and six attribution ratings made by each subject were summed separately to form an overall trait inference index and an overall attribution index. The means of these ratings are presented in Table 1. As predicted, second generation subjects formed more negative impressions of the target person ($M = -7.39$) than their yoked first generation counterparts ($M = -4.46$; $t(27) = 3.00$; $p < .01$). Similar findings emerged from an analysis of subjects' attribution ratings. Second generation subjects considered the target person's bad

deeds to be more a function of the target's underlying dispositions and less a product of mitigating circumstances than did first generation subjects ($t(27) = 2.96, p < .01$).

Internal analyses. To determine whether the relatively extreme dispositional inferences made by second generation subjects resulted from a tendency for first generation subjects to minimize the situational qualifications of the target's bad deeds, it was necessary to obtain an objective assessment of the number of bad deeds and qualifications of bad deeds that were contained in the videotapes originally shown to first generation subjects. Five judges independently watched each videotape and wrote down all statements describing events that made the target person look bad. The judges also wrote down all statements that tended to qualify the target person's bad deeds, or even created a favorable impression. Those statements listed by at least four judges were then used as part of the "objective" record of the number of statements in the videotapes that tended to create favorable or unfavorable impressions of the target persons.

The accounts provided by first generation subjects were then scored by three "naive" judges (Spearman-Brown index = .85) for how many of these good and bad deeds were communicated to the second generation subjects. As predicted, first generation subjects tended to emphasize the stimulus person's bad deeds in their secondhand accounts. A higher percentage of information fostering a bad impression of the target person (M 's = 62 and 70% for target persons A and B, respectively) was contained in the subjects' accounts than information fostering a good impression (M 's = 42 and 46%) (matched-pairs $t(13) = 5.78, p < .001$ for target person A, and $t(13) = 4.24, p < .001$ for target person B). First generation subjects chose to focus on the target person as a perpetrator of bad deeds, rather than the target as a victim of extenuating circumstances.²

² It is important to point out that the correlation—at the *subject-pair* level—between the relative tendency of first generation subjects to emphasize the bad aspects of the target person's actions and the trait ratings made by their yoked second generation counterparts was not statistically significant in either this study or in Experiment 2 below. However, this result should not be particularly surprising given the nature of the measure used to assess first generation subjects' emphasis on good or bad aspects of the target's actions. To maximize the objectivity of this measure, only those bad deeds or qualifications that were agreed upon by at least four of the five judges were included in the internal analysis. But the ratings of second generation subjects were no doubt influenced by the transmission of a great many other such events that were not included in the coding scheme. The impact of any such events that were not a part of the coding scheme would of course serve to attenuate the sought-after correlation. Of course, one could try to rectify this problem by simply counting up the total number of statements made by each first generation subject that conveyed a good or bad impression of the target person and then determining whether these totals correlate with the ratings made by their yoked second generation counterparts. Such a correlation, however, would amount to little more than a demonstration that second generation subjects were responsive to the information they had received.

Discussion

These results support the present hypothesis that secondhand impressions may often be more extreme than those based on more immediate information. Second generation subjects attributed the target person's actions more to the kind of person he or she was than did first generation subjects. As a result, second generation subjects developed a much more negative impression of the target than their first generation counterparts. This experiment also provided evidence consistent with the mechanism hypothesized to account for the relative extremity of secondhand judgments. First generation subjects provided accounts that sharpened the details of the target person's bad deeds and leveled the situational qualifications of those deeds.

Although the results of this experiment provide clear support for the present thesis, a question can be raised about the generality of these findings. In particular, one can question whether the order in which the first generation subjects rated the target person and transmitted their accounts of the target's actions had an important impact on the results obtained. In this experiment, first generation subjects always rated the target person *before* transmitting their accounts to the second generation subjects. One could argue that providing a secondhand account of the target person's actions may serve to change the first generation subjects' *own* impressions of the target (cf. Bem, 1965, 1972; Higgins & Rholes, 1978). If so, then the impressions of first and second generation subjects might not differ if the first generation subjects' ratings were made after they had transmitted their account of the target's actions. This issue was addressed empirically in the experiment described below.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

This experiment consisted of a partial replication of the previous study, with the order in which the first generation subjects performed the rating/transmission tasks reversed. Twelve first generation subjects watched the videotape of the male target person (target person A from Table 1) used in Experiment 1. These subjects then provided a tape-recorded account of what they had witnessed on the videotape, following the same instructions as before. Only after providing these accounts did they rate the target person themselves.

To ensure that the results obtained in the previous experiment were not limited to a particular response format, different rating scales were used to assess subjects' impressions of the target person. Instead of the six bi-polar trait dimensions used before, four uni-polar scales were created using the negative term of a subset of the previous bi-polar scales. Subjects thus rated how bad, selfish, hurtful, and insensitive they thought the target was. These ratings were made on 9-point scales with one end labeled "extremely" and the other end "not at all." Each subject's ratings were summed across the four scales, with higher numbers indicating a more negative impression of the target. Subjects also rated on 9-point scales the extent to which the target's bad, selfish, hurtful, and insensitive actions were the result of the kind of person he was versus the circumstances he was in.

The ratings of the target made by first generation subjects were then compared to those

made by a yoked group of 12 second generation subjects. The subjects, half males and half females, were run individually.

Results and Discussion

Despite the change in the order of the rating/transmission tasks performed by the first generation subjects, the results were the same as those obtained in the first experiment. Second generation subjects formed more negative impressions of the target ($M = 20.58$) than did their first generation counterparts ($M = 15.42$; $t(11) = 2.91$; $p < .05$). Second generation subjects also made marginally more dispositional attributions for the target person's behavior ($M = 19.25$ versus $M = 16.83$; $t(11) = 1.96$; $p = .076$). Finally, as in the experiment reported above, an analysis of the accounts provided by the first generation subjects indicated that they contained more of the information that tended to foster a bad impression of the target ($M = 56\%$) than information that tended to qualify the target person's bad deeds ($M = 36\%$; matched-pairs $t(11) = 4.43$; $p < .001$).

The results of this experiment thus extend the generality of the findings from Experiment 1 and provide further support for the present thesis that secondhand impressions are often more extreme than those based on more immediate information. With a new response format and with the order of the rating/transmission tasks reversed, second generation subjects were still more inclined than their first generation counterparts to view the target person's actions as a reflection of underlying personal qualities. As a result, second generation subjects tended to form more negative impressions of the target person.

Although Experiment 2 successfully addressed an important concern about the generality of the present phenomenon, one important question remains. Thus far it has only been established that secondhand impressions of *negatively* valenced target persons are more extreme than those based on firsthand information. It remains to be seen whether secondhand observers also tend to form more extreme impressions of *positively* valenced targets.³ As a consequence, it is not clear at present whether secondhand impressions tend to be more *polarized* (as hypothesized) or simply more negative than those formed firsthand (a result that would obviously imply

³ An attempt was made in the first experiment to obtain ratings of positively valenced targets as well by showing first generation subjects a videotape in which the target person was asked to describe two good deeds in his or her life. It soon became clear, however, that this was not the best paradigm with which to pursue this issue, because the targets—despite talking only about good deeds they had done—were perceived *negatively* by the first generation subjects. Apparently, having the targets talk about their own good deeds made them sound too self-aggrandizing to be well liked by the first generation subjects. Because the targets were perceived negatively, an experiment utilizing these videotapes would simply have been a replication of the other studies that utilized negatively valenced targets.

a very different underlying mechanism than the one proposed). This question was examined by means of a very different paradigm in the next experiment, one that also sought to demonstrate an important implication of the present thesis for everyday life.

EXPERIMENT 3

According to the present analysis, it should be possible to document a general class of instances in which secondhand impressions—formed *outside* the laboratory—tend to be more extreme than those formed firsthand. One example might be our impressions of significant people in the lives of our friends. It often happens that we hear about such people but never meet them. In light of the results of the first two experiments, repeatedly hearing about them should produce impressions that tend to be more extreme than those held by people who know them firsthand. This experiment tested this hypothesis by directly assessing the impressions of a target person held by pairs of friends—one of whom knows the target person firsthand, and the other whose only knowledge of the target comes from his or her friend.

Method

The subjects were 24 male and 32 female volunteer undergraduates at Cornell University. Same-sex pairs of friends were recruited to participate in the experiment at the same time. Friendship pairs were preselected such that both subjects were aware of a third (target) person whom one of them (the “immediate acquaintance”) knew well and one (the “secondhand acquaintance”) had only heard about from the other.⁴ Upon arriving for the experiment, the subjects were separated into different rooms and individually asked whether the target person was generally likeable or unlikeable. All pairs of friends agreed on their global evaluation of the target person.

The subjects were then shown a list of 20 antonym pairs of traits. There was an evaluative direction within each trait pair: one trait word was clearly positive (e.g., clever) and the other clearly negative (e.g., dull). Each subject was asked to select 10 antonym pairs that were the most relevant or applicable to the target person. When they had finished, the

⁴ It should be pointed out that the recruitment of subjects for this experiment was quite selective. Pairs of friends were approached in various student residences around campus and “interviewed” as to whether they could think of a target person whom one of them knew well and the other had only heard about secondhand. Only those pairs of friends who appeared to genuinely like each other and who rapidly and confidently identified an appropriate target person were invited to participate in the experiment. To ensure that the experiment would include an equal number of ratings of positively and negatively valenced targets, the experimenter also made a preliminary assessment of the friends’ general attitude toward the target. To eliminate the possibility of experimenter bias in the selection of subjects, this question was always asked last, after a given pair of friends had already “passed” the selection process on the basis of the previous criteria. Any pair of friends who indicated agreement in their general attitude toward the target person were included in the experiment until the requisite number of positively and negatively valenced targets were obtained. Thus, assessments of the *relative* strength of the friends’ impressions of the target were not made and could not influence the selection of subjects.

TABLE 2
MEAN EVALUATIVE TRAIT RATINGS OF THE TARGET PERSON BY THEIR "IMMEDIATE" AND
"SECONDHAND" ACQUAINTANCES

Consensual evaluation of target person	Rater		Difference
	Immediate acquaintance	Secondhand acquaintance	
Likeable	29.43	32.14	2.71*
Unlikeable	-29.28	-33.21	-3.93*

Note. The individual scores that comprise these means are sums of six trait ratings on bi-polar scales ranging from -6 to +6. The positive term of each bi-polar trait dimension (e.g., witty) always occupied the positive end of the scale. Thus, greater positive numbers indicate a more favorable rating of the target and greater negative numbers indicate a more unfavorable rating.

* $p < .05$

experimenter took the two lists of traits and selected 6 antonym pairs that had been chosen on both lists. There were at least 6 trait pairs mutually selected by every pair of subjects; whenever there were more than 6 mutual selections, 6 were randomly selected by the experimenter. This procedure resulted in a set of 6 "ipsatized" trait scales for each target person. This was done to ensure that subjects' ratings were truly meaningful.

The six ipsatized pairs of traits were then made into six 13-point rating scales. The negative trait was listed at one end of the scale (-6), the positive trait at the other (+6), and "neither" in the middle (0). The set of six rating scales was given to each of the two subjects, who then individually rated the target person on each of the scales. Each subject also answered a series of background questions concerning his or her relationship with the other subject and the target person.

Results and Discussion

Background questions. An adequate test of the present hypothesis requires the selection of subjects who trust each other's opinions and who have talked together about the target person on numerous occasions. This was successfully accomplished on both counts. Each "secondhand acquaintance" was asked to rate on a 9-point scale "how credible or trustworthy are the stories, descriptions, or things that your friend tells you on the whole?" The mean response was 8.93, indicating extremely high levels of reported trust. Both subjects also estimated the number of times they had talked about the target person. The mean estimate of the "immediate acquaintances" was 17.71 times and that of the "secondhand acquaintances" was 18.25 times, indicating both substantial agreement between pairs of friends ($r = .60$) and numerous discussions of the target person.

Primary dependent measures. The six trait ratings made by each subject were summed to form an overall impression index. The means of these ratings are reported in Table 2. As predicted, more extreme ratings were made by subjects who had never met the target person, but had only

heard about the target from a friend. This was true both of target persons who were considered likeable ($t(13) = 2.66; p < .05$) and those who were considered unlikeable ($t(13) = 2.27; p < .05$).

These data extend the results of the first two experiments in several important ways. First, they demonstrate that the relative extremity of secondhand impressions is a general phenomenon that applies to both positively and negatively evaluated targets. These data also make clear that the present phenomenon is not simply a laboratory process of questionable relevance to real world settings. It affects our judgments of significant people in our everyday lives. This phenomenon presumably stems from the kind of descriptions of a third person that we typically receive from our friends. Given that the person being described is often the focus of our friend's "story," characteristics of that person will often be sharpened whereas various mitigating circumstances and situational influences that may have prompted that person's behavior will often be leveled. Our friends can be expected to obey conversational conventions dictating that their accounts should be informative but not laden with too many details (Grice, 1975). As a result, they may be inclined to ignore or minimize the context surrounding the target person's actions or the previous occasions in which the target behaved inconsistently with the actions being described.

This experiment also extends the findings of the first two studies by obtaining analogous results in a paradigm that involved a true comparison between firsthand and secondhand impressions. First generation subjects in the initial experiments did not witness the target person's actions firsthand; instead, they heard an already summarized account of those actions. In an important respect, then, the first two experiments involved comparisons between secondhand and thirdhand impressions. In this third experiment, however, the first generation subjects received no information about the targets from the experimenter. The stories they told their friends were no doubt based largely on their own firsthand experience with the target person.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research calls attention to an important truth about social judgment—that people's inferences about human events are dramatically affected by the perspective or "distance" from which they are viewed. Just as people's social judgments differ depending upon whether they are made immediately or after some delay (Miller & Porter, 1980; Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979; Peterson, 1980), they also vary with whether they are based on firsthand or secondhand information. Secondhand impressions of other people and their actions are often unqualified by mitigating situational constraints or behavioral inconsistencies. Thus, unless we suspect that our source of information is unreliable, we often

consider actions that we hear about secondhand to be a reflection of the actor's personality. We thus make more internal attributions and stronger trait inferences after hearing about a person's actions secondhand than after witnessing those actions ourselves.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the kind of information about another person's actions that we are likely to receive secondhand. Those who provide us with such information can usually be counted on to conform to certain conversational rules regarding brevity and relevance (Grice, 1975) and therefore convey mainly the gist of the person's actions (Allport & Postman, 1947; Bartlett, 1932). Certain aspects of the person's behavior will be emphasized and others deleted. Since actions form a more natural "unit" with the person than with the "situation" (Heider, 1944; Quattrone, 1982), and since the action and the person can often be readily described in the same terminology (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Nisbett & Ross, 1980), secondhand accounts should more often emphasize the person involved than the surrounding circumstances. Direct support for this hypothesized mechanism was obtained in Experiments 1 and 2. First generation subjects in those experiments tended to omit important qualifications of the target person's actions when asked to provide a secondhand account of the target's behavior.

It is important to point out that the results reported above may very well underestimate the extremity of secondhand impressions in everyday social life. In the real world, people often take liberties with the truth and transmit deliberately exaggerated accounts of another person's actions in order to convey a more interesting story and be perceived as a more compelling person. In the laboratory, on the other hand, subjects no doubt feel an unusually keen obligation to provide an accurate account of the target person's actions. The present results thus indicate that even when people try to convey an accurate account of another person's actions—when the motivation to deliberately distort has been stripped away—they nevertheless provide accounts that systematically slant the judgments of secondhand observers.

It is also important to point out that there may be other "nonmotivational" factors that might contribute to the relative extremity of secondhand impressions, factors that were not examined in the present research. One such contributing factor can be derived from the work of Linville and Jones (1980). Their research indicates that people's judgments of a target person tend to be polarized when their cognitive representations of the group to which the target belongs are relatively impoverished—as people's representations of "outgroups" in particular generally are. In the present experiments, second generation subjects no doubt had less developed representations of the target than did first generation subjects. Thus, any information about the target's actions would have had more "evaluative significance" (cf. Linville & Jones, 1980, p. 701)

for the second generation subjects, leading them to develop more extreme impressions of the target. This is exactly what was found, as the subjects who had only heard about the target secondhand liked the likeable targets (Experiment 3) and disliked the dislikeable targets (Experiments 1, 2, and 3) more than did those with more direct knowledge of the targets' actions. Although the work of Linville and Jones relates most directly to the results of the third experiment reported above (their framework, for example, does not adequately explain the attribution results of the first two experiments),⁵ their analysis is also relevant—at an abstract level—to the first two experiments and, more generally, to the overall thesis about the nature of secondhand social judgment. Secondhand observers may be functionally in the same position as a person trying to evaluate an outgroup member and who must rely on relatively impoverished knowledge of the target. As both the present results and those reported by Linville and Jones suggest, the impressions formed under such “distant” conditions are likely to be relatively polarized and extreme. Further effort needs to be devoted to examining the relationship between these two converging lines of research.

There may be a second contributory cause of the relative extremity of secondhand impressions, one that I find particularly provocative but which at present is entirely speculative. This mechanism involves the attributional processes of the secondhand observer rather than the nature of the message that is transmitted. When we hear about another person's actions secondhand, we rarely receive a complete account of all that happened and what might have initiated or influenced the events in question. It is often necessary, therefore, to construct our personal understanding of the events in light of the available details. In such circumstances, our first response may be to try to make sense of the action by considering how it fits with the actor's personality rather than how it stems from the nature of the situation in which it took place. In our efforts to extract meaning from incomplete descriptions of social actions, we may be predisposed to search for ways in which the actions are typical of the persons involved. Since secondhand judgments are nearly always based on impoverished information, we might expect secondhand observers to make relatively strong dispositional inferences about a target person even if the account they receive of that person's actions has not already sharpened the person and leveled the situation. Although this

⁵ The astute reader will also notice that it is stretching things a bit to apply Linville and Jones's analysis to the first two experiments because in those studies *both* first and second generation subjects had relatively impoverished representations of the target person. First generation subjects' knowledge of the target, although clearly superior to that of second generation subjects, nevertheless fell short of the kind of detailed familiarity that people often have with “in-group” members.

analysis is entirely speculative at the present time, research designed to examine this issue is being developed.

As mentioned in the introduction, the present results are also related to those reported in the cognitive tuning literature (Brock & Fromkin, 1968; Cohen, 1961; Harkins et al., 1977; Harvey et al., 1976; Leventhal, 1962; Zajonc, 1960). Recall that the studies carried out in that tradition have generally found that people who expect to transmit stimulus information to another person develop more polarized representations of that information than people who expect to receive additional stimulus information. In the present experiments, first generation subjects passed on such polarized accounts of the target person's actions to second generation subjects, although their own ratings of the target (made either before or after the transmission) appeared to reflect the influence of more differentiated information as well. The fact that the polarized representations formed by the "transmitters" in these experiments had less of an influence on their own ratings than on those of the "receivers" presumably stemmed from the fact that the transmitters were at least exposed to all of the complexity of the original information; the receivers were not.

The present results go beyond those reported in the cognitive tuning literature in at least three important respects. Perhaps most importantly, the present analysis specifies the *direction* in which secondhand accounts of other people's actions will be slanted: Details of the actor and his or her actions will be enhanced at the expense of information about the surrounding context. The cognitive tuning literature, in contrast, only stipulates that transmitters will develop unified representations of whatever stimulus information they expect to convey (which could just as well be nonsocial information) without specifying which aspects of that information are likely to be sharpened or leveled.

In addition, the phenomenon of cognitive tuning appears to be almost entirely due to encoding processes, whereas no such limitation of locus is implied or predicted by the present analysis. In virtually all of the cognitive tuning experiments (Zajonc, 1960, Experiment 1 is the one exception), the manipulation of whether subjects expected to transmit or receive information was invoked *before* subjects were exposed to the stimulus information. In the one experiment that explicitly varied the timing of the transmission/reception set (Harkins et al., 1977), the standard tuning effects were obtained only when the set was invoked *prior* to subjects' exposure to the stimulus information, indicating that virtually all of the polarization of the stimulus information observed in cognitive tuning experiments occurs when the information is originally encoded. In contrast, the present set of experiments examined the case—one that is perhaps more ecologically representative—in which a person first encodes a body of information and only afterwards develops an intention to describe that information to someone else. The fact that the robust effects

observed in these experiments were nonetheless obtained indicates that the present results are not “merely” a cognitive tuning effect.

Finally, the present results go beyond those reported in the cognitive tuning literature by demonstrating that the unified representations formed as a result of transmitting a message do in fact get conveyed in the communication process and have the hypothesized impact on the receivers' judgments. Recall that the experiments on cognitive tuning have only compared the responses of subjects who have all been exposed to the same target information. In these previous experiments, no information is ever communicated from one group of subjects to another. In the present experiment, in contrast, the only information that second generation subjects received was that provided by their first generation counterparts. The nature of this information was such that the second generation subjects arrived at more extreme impressions of the target person than did first generation subjects. Thus, although one might have expected second generation subjects to moderate their judgments because their knowledge of the target person was indirect (and thus possibly unreliable), any such inferential caution that may have existed was swamped by the one-sidedness of the information on which their judgments were based.

An important theoretical implication of the present results is that they shed further light on the “actor–observer” difference in attribution (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). This difference refers to the tendency for people to attribute their own behavior to external circumstances and the behavior of others to underlying traits. As a consequence, “other people” are the ones who are thought to have stable personality traits. This is precisely what one would expect in light of the present results, since knowledge of our own behavior is always firsthand, whereas we often only hear about another person's actions from someone else. Thus, we are more likely to make dispositional attributions for others' behavior than our own, and we are more likely to make more extreme inferences about another person's stable dispositions.

Like nearly all social psychological phenomena, difficult questions can be raised about the generality of the present results. According to the present formulation, secondhand impressions *tend* to be more extreme than firsthand impressions because firsthand observers *tend* to leave out the situational qualifications of a target person's actions when describing those actions to someone else. But this may not happen in all cases. There may be times when the situation, rather than the person, is the real “story,” and firsthand observers may create secondhand accounts that reflect this fact. A secondhand account of *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*, for example, might focus less on the specific characters involved than the nature of the characters' environment.

This qualification no doubt has merit and it suggests a need for further research to determine the characteristics of different actions or events

that prompt people to discuss them either in terms of those who perform them or the situations in which they take place. But this qualification notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge that people are generally the most compelling elements in the social environment, and as such will more often than not serve as the focus of the stories we hear or tell. The phenomenon documented in this research, then, constitutes a truly important influence on people's judgments that should be kept in mind whenever we judge those we have never met.

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