Person Memory and Judgment: Pragmatic Influences on Impressions Formed in a Social Context

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Ss who receive information about a person's traits and behaviors in a social context are likely to focus their attention on the pragmatic implications of this information (i.e., why the information was conveyed). To examine this hypothesis, Ss listened to a taped conversation in which a male target (T) and another speaker (O) exchanged anecdotal accounts of T's behavior. Ss typically used O's trait description of T to form an evaluative concept of O rather than of T, whereas T's trait description of himself had no effect on evaluations of him. Ss had better recall of statements O made when they were unfavorable and, therefore, violated a conversational norm to be polite. However, behaviors that T himself mentioned were often recalled better when they were favorable, and therefore, in violation of a normative expectation to appear modest. The inconsistency of T's behaviors with initial trait descriptions of him had little effect on the recall of these behaviors.

The information one receives about people in conversation can come both from statements the people make about themselves and statements that others make about them. These statements can describe either general characteristics of an individual's personality or specific behaviors the person has performed. Recipients of this information often use it to form impressions of the person being described and to infer the person's traits and general likableness (Srull & Wyer, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1989). On the other hand, they are also likely to form impressions of the individuals who convey information about others. The present article is concerned with the cognitive processes that underlie the use of the information conveyed about a person in a social context and their effects on both the recall of information and judgments to which it is relevant.

In considering these matters, it is necessary to take into account a number of factors that have usually not come into play in previous research on person memory and judgment (for reviews, see Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Wyer & Carlson, in press; Wyer & Srull, 1989). In this research, the persons described are often fictitious, and the information presented about them (trait adjective and behavior descriptions) often comes from an unspecified source. Consequently, subjects have no reason to question either its validity or its representativeness, and so they are likely to base their impressions primarily on its semantic, literal meaning.

In contrast, the information that is acquired about people in a social context (e.g., in informal conversation) is likely to come from a source (the people themselves or acquaintances) whose objectivity, credibility, and motives for conveying the information are often unclear. In these conditions, recipients are likely not only to pay attention to the literal implications of the information for attributes of the person it describes but to question why the information is being conveyed to them. These pragmatic implications of information are usually not taken into account when information is presented out of its social context.

Indirect evidence that subjects do, in fact, consider the pragmatic implications of information they receive in a social context was obtained by Wyer, Budesheim, and Lambert (1990). Subjects listened to a tape-recorded conversation between two people about a male acquaintance (the target person). They were first given handwritten trait adjective descriptions of the target that the speakers had ostensibly provided, and then they listened to the speakers exchange anecdotal accounts of the target's behavior. This information was very similar to that presented to subjects in previous studies of person memory and judgment in which information was conveyed out of context (e.g., in a randomized list). However, the results obtained were quite different.

In the earlier research, for example, impressions of the target person were based largely on initial trait adjective descriptions (Wyer & Carlson, in press). In contrast, the initial trait descriptions conveyed in Wyer et al.'s (1990) study had little effect

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1 An equal number of favorable and unfavorable behaviors were presented (see also Srull, Lichtenstein, & Rothbart, 1983; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Srull, 1984; Wyer & Gordon, 1982; Wyer & Martin, 1986). Moreover, the behaviors described by each speaker implied a value either along the same dimension as the speaker's initial trait description of the target or along a different dimension (Wyer & Gordon, 1982; Wyer et al., 1984; Wyer & Martin, 1986).

2 Certain results appear superficially contradictory to this conclusion. Hensley and Marmurek (1982), for example, found that initial trait descriptions of a person had little effect on evaluative judgments of the person or on the recall of his behaviors (see also Bargh & Thein, 1985; Rothbart, Evans, & Fulero, 1979). In their study, however, subjects re-
on subjects' judgments of the target person himself. Rather, subjects used these descriptions to form concepts of the speakers as either likable or dislikable, depending on the favorableness of their characterization of the target. Moreover, subjects typically had better recall of behaviors mentioned in the conversation that confirmed the validity of these concepts. Specifically, they typically recalled better those behaviors a speaker mentioned that were inconsistent with the trait description of the target by the other speaker. Such behaviors suggest that the other speaker's trait description of the target was inaccurate. Therefore, they confirmed the subjects' assumption that this speaker's description reflected a general disposition to evaluate others favorably (or unfavorably) rather than attributes of the target himself.

These data suggest that subjects with the goal of forming an impression of a person on the basis of information they receive in a social context spontaneously evaluate the source of such information. Indeed, they may regard this evaluation as a precondition for assessing the implications of the information that the source provides about the target. Other factors can also stimulate pragmatic information processing. In a quite different research paradigm, Gruenfeld and Wyer (1992) found that when subjects read statements that ostensibly violated a normative expectation for communications to be informative (i.e., to convey new information; Green, 1989; Grice, 1975; Higgins, 1981; Sperber & Wilson, 1986), they appeared to question why the statements were made and thus to draw implications from the statements that were not reflected by their literal meaning. This could indicate a more general tendency for the recipients of statements made in a social context to consider their pragmatic implications when they violate normative expectations for the sorts of communications that are usually conveyed in this context.

In summary, the studies by Wyer et al. (1990) and Gruenfeld and Wyer (1992) suggest that when information is conveyed in a social context, a consideration of its pragmatic implications can be influenced by (a) the relevance of these implications to subjects' information-processing objectives (e.g., impression formation) and (b) the extent to which the literal meaning of the information deviates from expectations for the sort of communications that are typically transmitted in this context. Both factors were expected to operate in the situations we investigated in the present research. Subjects listened to a conversation between two male college students. The conversation was similar in content to that used by Wyer et al. (1990), except that the discussion centered around one of the speakers rather than a third person. That is, before listening to the conversation, subjects were given a set of trait adjectives that one speaker (the target) had used to describe himself, as well as a trait description of the target that the other speaker had provided. Then, during the conversation, the target made several statements describing both favorable and unfavorable things he had done. In addition, the other speaker mentioned several favorable and unfavorable behaviors that the target had performed. Overall, the information conveyed about the target was similar to that presented in earlier person memory research (see Footnote 1). However, the situational context of the information was expected to affect subjects' attention to the pragmatic implications of the information conveyed by the speakers as well as its semantic implications. These possibilities are elaborated in the following sections.

Theoretical Background

The effects of pragmatic factors on information processing in the studies to be reported were inferred from both the judgments that subjects made and the type of behaviors they recalled. In predicting these effects, we assumed that the ease of recalling the behaviors mentioned in the conversation reflected the amount of cognitive processing of these behaviors at the time they were described (cf. Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Wyer & Hartwick, 1980; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Thus, the effects of source and situational variables on the amount of thought devoted to different types of behavioral information should be reflected in the effects of these variables on the recall of this information as well as on subjects' judgments of the person to whom the information is relevant.

Effects of Trait Descriptions on Judgments

In our previous study (Wyer et al., 1990), subjects spontaneously used speakers' trait descriptions of the target to form impressions of the speakers themselves rather than an impression of the target. As noted earlier, this may have been done to facilitate the interpretation of the statements that speakers made subsequently. We expected that, in the present study, analogous effects would occur. That is, subjects should attribute more favorable qualities (e.g., tolerance and friendliness) to people who evaluate others favorably than to people who disparage others. Therefore, if subjects attribute the other speaker's description of the target to a general disposition of that speaker rather than to idiosyncratic characteristics of the target, they should like the other speaker more if he describes the target favorably than if he describes the target unfavorably.

The effects of the target's trait description of himself on evaluations of him were less clear, however. To the extent that subjects attend to the literal implications of this description, they should evaluate the target more favorably when his self-description is favorable than when it is not. However, the pragmatic implications of the target's self-description might be quite the opposite of its literal implications. That is, a favorable self-de-

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3 The effects of speakers' trait descriptions on judgments were generally evident regardless of whether subjects were told to form an impression of the target or were explicitly told to form impressions of the speakers. When subjects were told to form impressions of the target, however, the recall differences were evident only when the speaker was female (and, therefore, of the opposite sex from the target person). Subjects, in the absence of explicit instructions to consider both speakers, apparently focused their attention on only the female speaker rather than viewing the conversation from a disinterested perspective.
scription might be interpreted as arrogant and therefore be viewed negatively, whereas an unfavorable self-description could convey modesty. Therefore, the magnitude and direction of the effects of the target’s self-description on subjects’ evaluations of him could depend on the relative contributions of the semantic meaning of the description and the pragmatic meaning that subjects assign to it.

In this regard, the role of pragmatic factors in reactions to a person’s self-description may depend on part in the particular attributes to which this description refers, the social context in which it occurs, and the type of judgment to be made. In a study conducted by Jones, Schwartz, and Gilbert (1984), for example, subjects anticipated bargaining with a partner who had been described by himself or another as either honest or dishonest. Then they watched a video in which the prospective partner either did or did not misrepresent himself to gain a bargaining advantage over someone else. In this situation, the partner’s self-description had more impact on subjects’ later judgments of his honesty than did the other speaker’s description of him. In this study, however, subjects anticipated interacting with the target person in a situation to which the target’s self-description was directly relevant, and their judgments pertained to the particular attribute that was described. This may have introduced situation-specific motives in the subject, as well as attributions of motives to both the partner and acquaintance, that do not usually exist in more informal social contexts.

A study conducted by Rosen, Cochran, and Musser (1990) is also of interest in this regard. Subjects evaluated job applicants on the basis of both the applicants’ self-descriptions and letters of reference. When candidates’ letters of reference were favorable, their self-evaluations had a positive influence on subjects’ recommendations of them for the job, suggesting that subjects based their judgments on the semantic implications of these evaluations. When the reference letters were unfavorable, however, candidates’ self-descriptions had a negative impact on subjects’ recommendations. This suggests that subjects in the latter condition paid more attention to the pragmatic implications of candidates’ self-descriptions, perhaps interpreting favorable self-evaluations as manipulative, deceitful, or arrogant.

However, it is important to note that, in both this study and that of Jones et al. (1984), the judgments made were ones to which the semantic implications of the target’s self-description were particularly relevant. The pragmatic implications of self-descriptions often concern attributes other than those to which these descriptions specifically refer. Thus, for example, a man who describes himself as intelligent may be inferred to have this attribute but also to be conceited. These latter, pragmatic implications may outweigh the more favorable semantic implications of the description when subjects are asked to report their liking for the person. Thus, likability judgments may generally be more influenced by pragmatic considerations than are the sorts of judgments made by subjects in the studies of Jones et al. (1984) and Rosen et al. (1990).

Given these ambiguities, only predictions concerning the effects of the other speaker’s description of the target seemed appropriate.

Hypothesis 1: The favorableness of the other speaker’s trait description of the target will have a positive influence on subjects’ liking for this speaker but will not necessarily affect their liking for the target himself.

Effects of Trait Descriptions on the Recall of Behaviors

Hypothesis 1 has additional implications. Wyer et al.’s (1990) findings suggest that when subjects have formed a favorable or unfavorable concept of a speaker on the basis of the speaker’s trait description of the target, they think more extensively about information that confirms the validity of this concept (this could reflect a tendency to engage in confirmatory hypothesis testing; see Snyder & Cantor, 1979). In particular, they devote more attention to behaviors mentioned by the other speaker that are inconsistent with the trait description and, therefore, confirm their assumption that this description reflects a general disposition of the speaker who provided it rather than a characteristic of the target. Therefore, suppose subjects form a concept of the other speaker as likable or dislikable on the basis of that speaker’s trait description of the target (Hypothesis 1). They should then think more extensively about the behaviors mentioned by the target that are inconsistent with this description than about the behaviors that are consistent with it.

A corresponding effect of the target’s self-description on the recall of behaviors was not expected. That is, an evaluative concept of the target may not be systematically influenced by his self-description, as indicated earlier. Consequently, the recall of behaviors mentioned by the other speaker may not depend on the nature of this description. These considerations lead to the following prediction:

Hypothesis 2: Behaviors mentioned by the target will be recalled better if they are evaluatively inconsistent with the other speaker’s trait description than if they are consistent with this description. In contrast, behaviors mentioned by the other speaker will not be affected by the target’s self-description.

Two additional considerations should be mentioned. First, subjects’ use of the target’s behavior statements to confirm their concept of the other speaker might be expected to occur primarily when their objective is to form an impression of that speaker rather than an impression of the target himself. However, the research by Wyer et al. (1990) suggests that subjects spontaneously form concepts of speakers even in the absence of instructions to do so. Consequently, we expected Hypothesis 2 to hold regardless of whether subjects were told explicitly to form an impression of the other speaker or were told to form an impression of the target.

Second, the reasoning underlying Hypothesis 2 does not provide for the sort of semantic inconsistency resolution that often occurs when trait and behavioral information about a person is conveyed out of its social context (e.g., in a randomized list; Srull & Wyer, 1989). Under these conditions, subjects appear to form a concept of the target on the basis of the initial trait information and process more extensively subsequent behaviors they encounter that are evaluatively inconsistent with this concept. These processes presumably result from attempts to reconcile the occurrence of the inconsistent behaviors with other information available about the target (for a more precise conceptualization of these processes, see Srull & Wyer, 1989). In the present conditions, an initial concept of the target was not expected to be formed on the basis of either the other speaker’s
trait description of the target or the target’s trait description of himself. Therefore, the semantic inconsistency resolution processes observed in previous studies of person memory were not hypothesized.

**Effects of Conversational Norms on Behavior Recall**

A consideration of the role of pragmatics in processing the information conveyed in a social context calls attention to the fact that speakers’ descriptions of the target’s behavior are communicative acts. As such, they are likely to be thought about more extensively (and, therefore, to be better recalled) when they violate implicit normative principles of communication (Green, 1989; Grice, 1975; Higgins, 1981; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). There are, of course, many such principles, all of which could influence the comprehension of information conveyed in a social context. These effects have been considered in research on communication in close relationships (Scott, Fuhrman, & Wyer, 1991), the interpretation of news (Gruenfeld & Wyer, 1992), humor elicitation (Wyer & Collins, 1992), and responses to opinion surveys (Strack & Martin, 1987).

An assumption underlying much of this research and theory is that when subjects encounter a statement whose literal implications violate a conversational norm, they think more extensively about the statement to understand why it was made, often reinterpreting it in a way that does not correspond to its literal meaning (Gruenfeld & Wyer, 1992; Wyer & Collins, 1992). This reinterpretation can often require inferences about characteristics of the source. A norm of particular relevance in the present context is to be polite or not to offend the listener (Green, 1989; Scott et al., 1991; Wyer & Collins, 1992). That is, the other speaker’s mention of an unfavorable behavior that the target has performed, which is likely to embarrass the target, is presumably counternormative. Therefore, it should be thought about more extensively and, consequently, recalled better than this speaker’s description of a favorable action.

The pragmatic implications of the statements that the target makes about himself may be quite different. That is, a person’s mention of favorable things he or she personally has done (like favorable trait descriptions) might be regarded as boastful, whereas his or her mention of unfavorable behaviors (if not carried to an extreme) could convey modesty. Therefore, if boastfulness is considered more counternormative than modesty, subjects might think more extensively about favorable behaviors mentioned by the target than about unfavorable ones.

A problem in evaluating this hypothesis results from the fact that unfavorable behaviors may generally be more novel (Wyer, 1970, 1974). Consequently, these behaviors might elicit generally more extensive processing than favorable ones, giving them a general advantage that occurs over and above the effects just described. However, Hypothesis 3 nevertheless seems justified.

**Hypothesis 3**: The recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors over favorable ones should be greater when the other speaker mentions the behaviors than when the target mentions them.

**Effects of Behavior Diagnosticity**

According to Hypothesis 3, the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors mentioned by the other speaker results from subjects’ sensitivity to the pragmatic implications of these behaviors. This does not mean that the literal implications of the behaviors described for the target’s personality and likableness have no influence at all on the processing of them. This influence could occur independently of the effect of the behaviors’ pragmatic implications. For example, unfavorable behaviors may be considered to be relatively more diagnostic of a person’s underlying personality (cf. Claes & Timmers, 1993; Jones & Davis, 1965; Rothbart & Park, 1986; for a review and theoretical analysis of the difference between favorable and unfavorable information and the effects of this difference, see Skowronski & Carlton, 1989). Consequently, subjects with the goal of forming an impression of the target are likely to think more extensively about the target’s unfavorable behaviors than about his favorable ones (Fiske, 1980). Thus, they should recall the unfavorable behaviors better. Note that these diagnosticity-mediated effects, which may occur over and above the more general effects of novelty and distinctiveness on amount of processing discussed earlier, should be evident when subjects have the goal of forming an impression of the target but not when they have other goals in mind. Hypothesis 4, therefore, seems justified.

**Hypothesis 4**: The recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors mentioned in the conversation will be greater when subjects are told to form an impression of the target than when they are told to form an impression of the other speaker.

Three studies are reported. Experiment 1 was a pretest to evaluate our assumptions concerning subjects’ beliefs about the likelihood and appropriateness of mentioning favorable and unfavorable behaviors in conversations of the type being considered here. Experiments 2 and 3 tested hypotheses based on these assumptions.

**Experiment 1**

Our analysis of subjects’ responses to information conveyed in conversations assumes that the mention of an unfavorable behavior a person has performed in the person’s presence violates a conversational norm to be polite and, therefore, is considered socially inappropriate. In contrast, mentioning a favorable behavior that one has personally performed might be considered to be self-serving and, therefore, to be more
counternormative than mentioning an unfavorable behavior. The following study evaluated these assumptions.

Method

Twenty-five introductory social psychology students were administered a short questionnaire during a regular class period. They were told to assume that two people, Bill and Tom, were having a conversation about the behaviors that one of them, Tom, had performed over the past year or so. Then, on one page of the form, they were asked to estimate (a) how likely it was that Bill would mention favorable behaviors that Tom had performed, (b) how socially appropriate (acceptable) it would be for Bill to mention such behaviors, (c) how likely it was that Bill would mention unfavorable behaviors that Tom had performed, and (d) how socially appropriate (acceptable) it would be for Bill to mention such behaviors. On the next page, the questions were similar, except that subjects were told to consider behaviors that Tom mentioned about himself.

Likelihood estimates were made on an 11-point scale ranging from not at all likely (0) to extremely likely (10). Social appropriateness judgments were made on a similar scale ranging from not at all appropriate (0) to extremely appropriate (10).

Results

Subjects' estimates of the likelihood that speakers would mention favorable and unfavorable behaviors are presented in the top half of Table 1. Subjects expected that unfavorable behaviors were less apt to be mentioned (M = 4.24) than favorable ones (M = 7.04), F(1, 24) = 16.12, p < .01, and this was true regardless of whether these behaviors were reported by the actor himself or by the other speaker. This difference may reflect subjects' beliefs that unfavorable behaviors are generally more novel, or less likely to occur, than favorable ones (Wyer, 1970, 1974). To this extent, these differences confirm the assumptions underlying Hypothesis 4.

Subjects' estimates of the social appropriateness of mentioning each type of behavior reveal a different pattern. These estimates are shown in the bottom half of Table 1. Subjects considered it less appropriate for a speaker to mention unfavorable behaviors the other speaker had performed than to mention favorable ones, F(1, 24) = 74.69, p < .01. However, they considered it slightly less appropriate for the speaker to mention favorable behaviors that he personally had performed than to mention unfavorable ones (p > .10). The interaction implied by this difference was significant, F(1, 24) = 29.83, p < .01.

This finding confirms our assumption that the mention of a person's undesirable behavior in the person's presence violates a conversational norm to be polite. However, subjects did not judge the speaker's mention of his own favorable behaviors to be appreciably more inappropriate than his mention of unfavorable ones. This could indicate that subjects do not believe either positive or negative self-descriptions to be particularly counternormative. It seems intuitively unlikely, however, that favorable statements about oneself are never considered boastful and socially undesirable. Perhaps the mention of favorable things about oneself is considered socially inappropriate only if it is done to excess. Thus, a large number of such statements might be necessary for subjects to interpret them as counternormative. The implications of this possibility are reconsidered presently.

Experiment 2

Overview

Subjects listened to a tape-recorded discussion between two male college students (T [the target] and O [the other speaker]). Before doing so, however, they were given two sets of trait adjectives, one of which O had ostensibly used to describe T and the other of which T had used to describe himself. In the course of the conversation, both T and O exchanged anecdotal accounts of T's behaviors. These behaviors varied both in favorableness and in whether they pertained to the same trait as the speaker's trait adjective description or to a different one. After hearing the conversation, subjects reported their liking for both T and O and inferred the two speakers' liking for one another. Finally, they recalled the behaviors that had been described in the conversation.

This procedure was used under two task objective conditions. In the target-impression condition, subjects were told, before listening to the conversation, that their task was to form an impression of the person being described (T). In the other-impression condition, they were told that their objective was to form an impression of O.

Design and Subjects

The experimental design and stimulus materials were very similar to those used by Wyer et al. (1990) as well as several other studies of person memory (cf. Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Srull, 1984; Wyer & Martin, 1986). Specifically, the initial trait adjectives that each speaker (T or O) used to describe T conveyed that he was kind, unkind, intelligent, or unintelligent. The behaviors mentioned by each speaker, regardless of the speaker's initial trait description of T, included three that exemplified each of the same four traits, thus, six behaviors exemplified each trait, with three being mentioned by one speaker and three by the other. The 16 possible combinations of speakers' trait adjective descriptions (four descriptions by one speaker crossed with four descriptions by the other) constituted two stimulus replications of a 2 X 2 X 2 between-subjects
design involving (a) the favorableness of O’s trait description of T, (b) the favorableness of T’s self-description, and (c) the dimensional relatedness of these descriptions (whether they were along the same or different trait dimensions). Similarly, the behaviors mentioned by each speaker constituted all four levels of a 2 × 2 within-subjects design involving (a) the descriptive relatedness of the behaviors to this speaker’s characterization of T (i.e., whether they implied a value along the same trait dimension as this characterization or a different one) and (b) their evaluative implications (favorable vs. unfavorable).

One hundred ninety-two introductory psychology students participated to fulfill a course requirement. Ninety-six of these students, run in groups of 6 to 8 each, were assigned randomly to each task objective condition, with 12 being exposed to each combination of the three between-subjects variables just noted (6 subjects per stimulus replication).

Procedure

Target-impression conditions. Subjects who were told to form an impression of T were introduced to the study with instructions that (a) the study was concerned with how people use information about others to form impressions of them; (b) much of the information we receive about people comes either from our personal interactions with them or with what is said about them in the course of informal conversations; (c) we often hear persons talk about themselves with someone they know, describing things they have said and done, and (d) in listening to a conversation, we learn something from not only the things a person says about himself but also the things the other person says. We suggested that a good way to understand how impressions are formed in such situations is to have people carry on an informal conversation with someone they know well and then to ask other people to listen to the conversation and form an impression of the person being talked about.

The instructions went on to indicate that we had tape-recorded several conversations between pairs of upper-division psychology students who volunteered to spend 5–10 min talking about one another and that subjects would be hearing one of these tapes. Subjects were told that, as they listened to the conversation, they should “try to form as clear an impression as you can of the person being talked about.” They were told that after hearing the tape, they would be asked some questions about the impressions they had formed.

After this introduction, a portion of the tape was played in which two male students were ostensibly given instructions concerning the purpose of the study, how the tape would be used, and what they were supposed to do. After completing these instructions, the two speakers (referred to in the tape as Don and Bob) were ostensibly asked to write down on a piece of paper a general description of T. That is, O was asked to think of three adjectives that best captured T’s personality, and T was asked to write down three adjectives that best described himself.

At this point, the tape recording was stopped, and subjects were given photocopies of the three trait adjectives that each speaker had ostensibly written down. The third adjective in each set (active and energetic in the descriptions ostensibly generated by T and O, respectively) was the same in all conditions. The other two adjectives varied over conditions with respect to the trait dimension to which they were relevant (kindness vs. intelligence) and their evaluative implications (favorable vs. unfavorable). Specifically, the pair that T ostensibly used to describe himself implied that he was either kind (kind and considerate), unkind (cold and unfriendly), intelligent (intelligent and witty), or unintelligent (unintelligent and dense). The same adjective pairs were ostensibly used by O to describe T except when his characterization of T was both evaluatively similar to T’s self-description and along the same dimension. In this condition, an alternative pair was attributed to one of the speakers to avoid duplication. (For example, hostile and unkind were ostensibly used by O to describe T when T had described himself as cold and unfriendly. In such conditions, the specific trait adjectives attributed to each speaker were counterbalanced across subjects.) All 16 combinations of the possible trait descriptions (four descriptions by T crossed with four descriptions by O) were therefore represented.

Subjects were given about 30 s to study the two adjective descriptions. Then they were asked to place the form beneath their seat, and the rest of the tape was played. The tone of the conversation was that of two friends exchanging anecdotes about the behaviors that one of them had performed. Two versions of each tape were constructed. Twenty-six behaviors were mentioned, 13 by each speaker, with the two versions of the tape differing in the particular set of 13 that T and O reported. The behaviors mentioned, originally drawn from a pool of stimuli used in earlier studies (Wyer & Budesheim, 1987; Wyer & Martin, 1986), were the same as those used in the conversation constructed by Wyer et al. (1990). Of the 13 behaviors reported by each speaker, 1 was neutral and 3 exemplified each of the four alternative traits implied by the initial trait adjective descriptions (i.e., 3 behaviors were kind, 3 were unkind, 3 were intelligent, and 3 were unintelligent). These behaviors, therefore, varied in both their favorableness and their descriptive relatedness to the speaker’s initial trait description of T.

A segment of one conversation is as follows5 (attributes conveyed by the behavior descriptions are indicated in parentheses):

**Experiment:** Okay, then, why don’t we begin. Why don’t you start, Don?

**O:** Well, let’s see...well, you walk a mile to school each day, even when it’s freezing. (neutral) I guess I thought of that because it’s so damn cold today. Every time I offer you a ride you always say no.

**T:** Yeah, I never seem to get sick. It must be because I work out 3 or 4 times a week—I’m in pretty good shape. (neutral)

**O:** [Laughs] Better than me, anyway...I remember you won the university chess championship last fall. (intelligent)

**T:** [Laughs] I remember we went out to dinner that night to celebrate and I swore at the waiter at Eddies because I didn’t get served as quickly as I wanted. (hostile)

**O:** [Laughs] Yeah...I remember after we left Eddies, and we were supposed to go to that party at Jerry’s, you were trying to follow the directions he’d given you to get to his house and you got us totally lost! (unintelligent) Oh, by the way, did you know Jerry lost his job at the Union?

**T:** No, really? Gee, that’s rough.

**O:** Yeah. I thought of that ‘cause he told me you had loaned him 20 bucks for a date he had and stuff. (kind)

**T:** [Pause] Jesus, this is a lot harder than I thought. [To experimenter] You want specific behaviors, right? Like I know I’m always smiling and saying hello to people when I walk down the street. But one particular instance doesn’t stand out. (kind)

**Experiment:** Well, try to be as specific as you can.

**T:** [Pause] Hmm...well, let’s see...well, I flunked a mechanics training course I took last semester—I don’t know why I took it anyway. (unintelligent)

Other-impression conditions. The procedure used when subjects were told to form an impression of O was identical to that used under target-impression conditions except for the initial instructions. These instructions conveyed that (a) we were interested in the impressions that are formed on the basis of what people say about others in the course of an informal conversation; (b) we often hear people talk about someone they know, discussing their experiences with the person and things the person said and did; and (c) in listening to the conversation, we not only learn about the person being described but also about the other people, based on things they say about the individual they are discussing. Then, after a description of the way the tape was prepared, subjects were told to, as

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5 Appreciation is extended to Jim Austin and Bob Bontempo for serving as the two speakers in the tapes used in this study.

6 A complete transcript is available from Robert S. Wyer, Jr.
they listened to the tape, “form as clear an impression as you can of the person who is NOT the object of discussion, but who is describing things the other person did.”

Assessment of Dependent Variables

The taped conversation lasted for approximately 4 min. When it was over, subjects were told that judgments are “sometimes more reliable when the information has had time to settle”; on this pretense, they were asked to complete a 5-min political science questionnaire, the content of which was unrelated to the current study. After completing this filler task, they were given a one-page questionnaire on which they were asked to estimate (a) how much they liked the person that the conversation was about, (b) how much they liked the other speaker, (c) how much the target liked the other speaker, and (d) how much the other speaker liked the target. All judgments were made on an 11-point scale ranging from dislike very much (−5) to like very much (5).

Subjects were then told that, to understand how people form impressions on the basis of information, it is helpful to know how much of the information they can recall. On this pretense, they were asked to write down on a blank sheet of paper as many of the behaviors that were mentioned in the conversation as they could remember. They were told to write them down in as close to the original wording as possible but that if they could not remember the original wording but could remember the idea, to write that down as well. They were urged to write down everything they could remember regardless of whether they took it into account in forming their impressions. Subjects were given 10 min to complete this task. Afterward, they were debriefed and dismissed.

Recalled behaviors were scored according to a gist criterion. That is, responses were scored as correct if they described the behavior conveyed by the original item, regardless of wording. Because previous studies (e.g., Srull, 1981; Wyer & Gordon, 1982) have invariably shown very high interjudge reliability in scoring such behaviors, a single judge, unaware of experimental conditions, was used.

Results

Judgment Data

As we expected, speakers’ trait descriptions of T influenced subjects’ inferences that O and T liked one another, as well as subjects’ liking for O. However, these descriptions had little effect on subjects’ liking for T. These conclusions are based on analyses of each judgment separately as a function of the favorableness of each speaker’s trait description, whether the speakers’ descriptions were along the same or different trait dimensions, and task objectives. Statistically significant (p < .05) results of these analyses are described in more detail subsequently. (All unmentioned effects were nonsignificant.)

Inferences that O liked T. Subjects were clearly aware of the evaluative implications of speakers’ trait adjective descriptions. That is, subjects inferred that O liked T more when his trait adjective descriptions of T were favorable (M = 2.21) than when they were unfavorable (M = 0.07), F(1, 176) = 48.13, p < .01, and this was true under both target-impression conditions and other-impression conditions. In addition, they inferred that O liked T more when his description of T was evaluatively similar to T’s self-description (M = 1.51) than when it was dissimilar (M = 0.62); this difference is confirmed by an interaction of T’s and O’s trait descriptions, F(1, 176) = 7.63, p < .01.

Inferences that T liked O. Unexpectedly, subjects’ inferences that T liked O increased with the favorableness of O’s description of T (M = 2.33 vs. 1.45 when O’s description was favorable vs. unfavorable, respectively), F(1, 176) = 13.20, p < .01. Thus, subjects apparently used O’s trait description of T to infer the favorableness of O’s overt responses to him outside the laboratory situation and based their prediction that T liked O on this criterion.

Subjects’ liking for O. According to Hypothesis 1, subjects should form an evaluative concept of O on the basis of his trait description of T. Therefore, their liking for O should increase with the favorableness of this description. This was the case. Subjects liked O more when he described T favorably (M = 0.86) rather than unfavorably (M = −0.21), F(1, 176) = 11.38, p < .01. This difference did not significantly depend on task objectives or on T’s description of O.

Subjects’ liking for T. Evaluations of T were generally unfavorable, and this was more true under target-impression conditions than under other-impression conditions (−0.78 vs. −0.19), F(1, 176) = 2.94, p < .10. This difference is consistent with our speculation that the unfavorable behavioral information conveyed in the conversation was considered more diagnostic of T’s personality than the favorable information (Skowronski & Carlson, 1989) and, therefore, received more attention by subjects whose objective was to form an impression of T (see also Birnbaum, 1974; Fiske, 1980). As implied by Hypothesis 1, however, O’s trait descriptions of T had no effect whatsoever on subjects’ liking for him. Subjects liked T no better when O had described him favorably than when he had described him unfavorably (−0.39 vs. −0.58) and no better when T’s self-description was favorable than when it was not (−0.46 vs. −0.51; in each case, F > 1).

Recall Data: Preliminary Analyses

When trait and behavioral information about a person is presented out of its social context, subjects typically have better recall of behaviors that are evaluatively inconsistent with the initial trait description of the target (and, therefore, with the concept of the target that they form on the basis of these descriptions) than behaviors that are consistent with the description (Srull & Wyer, 1989). In the present study, however, a clear evaluative concept of T was not formed on the basis of the initial trait descriptions of him. Therefore, we expected that analogous differences would not occur.

These expectations were confirmed. An analysis of variance was performed on the proportion of behaviors recalled as a function of (a) task objectives, (b) the favorableness of O’s trait description of T, (c) the favorableness of T’s self-description, (d) the dimensional relatedness of two trait descriptions of T (whether they were along the same or different trait dimensions), (e) the speaker who reported the recalled behaviors (T or O), and (f) the evaluative consistency of these behaviors with the trait description provided by the speaker who mentioned them. 7

7 The descriptive relatedness of the behaviors to the trait description provided by the speaker who mentioned them was initially included as an additional within-subjects variable. However, this variable entered into no interpretable effects, and so it was ignored in the final set of analyses (for other evidence that the descriptive relatedness of behaviors to initial trait descriptions of a target plays a minor role in their recall, see Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Srull, 1984; Wyer & Gordon, 1982).
Effects of initial trait descriptions (Hypothesis 2).

The first four variables were between subjects and the last two were within subjects. There was no evidence whatsoever that the recall of behaviors was affected by their evaluative consistency with the trait adjective description provided by the particular speaker who mentioned these behaviors. That is, the behaviors that a speaker mentioned were not recalled significantly better if they were inconsistent with this speaker’s trait description of T (M = .37) than if they were consistent with it (M = .38), F(1, 176) = 10.19, p < .01. This was true under both target-impression conditions and other-impression conditions and regardless of whether the behaviors were mentioned by T or by O. Moreover, it was true regardless of whether the two speakers’ trait adjective descriptions were evaluatively similar to one another or whether they differed. These null results confirm conclusions drawn by Wyer et al. (1990).

One other effect that emerged from this analysis is worth noting. Subjects recalled behaviors better under target-impression conditions (M = .41) than under other-impression conditions (M = .35), F(1, 176) = 10.19, p < .01. This suggests that subjects thought about the behaviors more extensively when they were asked to form an impression of T than when they were told to form an impression of O. This finding is consistent with our assumption that subjects in target-impression conditions thought about the behaviors in terms of their implications for both T’s personality and O’s personality, whereas subjects in other-impression conditions considered the behaviors only in terms of their implications for O. 7

Test of Hypotheses

Hypotheses 2–4 concerned the differential recall of favorable and unfavorable behavior descriptions. To evaluate this difference and contingencies in its occurrence, the proportion of behaviors recalled was analyzed as a function of the same variables considered in the first analysis, with one exception. Specifically, the consistency of the recalled behaviors with speakers’ trait descriptions was eliminated as a within-subjects variable and replaced by the favorableness of the recalled behaviors.

Unfavorable behaviors were generally recalled better (M = .40) than were favorable ones (M = .35), F(1, 176) = 18.22, p < .01. Considered in isolation, this effect could, of course, be attributed to idiosyncratic differences in the sets of behaviors we happened to select at the two favorableness levels. It could also reflect the generally greater novelty and distinctiveness of unfavorable information (Wyer, 1970, 1974) and the more extensive processing that was devoted to it as a result of these factors. As shown later, however, the magnitude of the effect was significantly contingent on other factors in ways that cannot be accounted for on these bases alone.

Effects of initial trait descriptions (Hypothesis 2). As indicated earlier, subjects spontaneously formed a concept of O as likable or dislikable on the basis of O’s initial trait description of T. According to Hypothesis 2, therefore, they should recall better those behaviors that confirm the validity of this concept.

That is, subjects should have better recall of behaviors T mentioned about himself that are inconsistent with O’s trait description of T and, consequently, suggest that this description reflects O’s likableness rather than T’s actual attributes. However, because subjects did not form a concept of T on the basis of T’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O’s trait description</th>
<th>Behaviors reported by T</th>
<th>Behaviors reported by O</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. O = other speaker; T = target.

trait description of himself (Hypothesis 1), analogous effects of these descriptions on the recall of behaviors that O mentioned should not occur.

Data bearing on this hypothesis are presented in Table 2, which shows the proportion of behaviors recalled as a function of their favorableness, the favorableness of O’s trait description of T, and the speaker who mentioned the behaviors. As noted earlier, the recall of behaviors that O himself mentioned did not appreciably depend on the behaviors’ consistency with O’s trait description of T. In contrast, the behaviors that T himself reported were remembered better if they were inconsistent with O’s description of him than if they were consistent with it (.39 vs. .36). Although this difference was not reliable, F(1, 176) = 2.52, p > .10, it was significantly different from the effect of consistency on the recall of behaviors mentioned by O himself, F(1, 176) = 5.11, p < .05. Thus, although some caution needs to be taken in drawing conclusions based on these data, the pattern of results is consistent with both Hypothesis 2 and our earlier findings (Wyer et al., 1990, Experiments 1 and 2).

As Hypothesis 2 also implies, analogous effects of T’s trait description of himself on the recall of behaviors were not evident. That is, behavior descriptions were not recalled any better if they were inconsistent with T’s self-description than if they were consistent with it, regardless of whether the behaviors were reported by T himself (.39 vs. .38) or by O (.39 vs. .37), F < 1.

Effects of conversational norms (Hypothesis 3). Experiment 1 confirmed our assumption that subjects would perceive O’s mention of T’s unfavorable behaviors to be socially inappropriate. However, perceptions of the appropriateness of T’s descriptions of his own behavior did not systematically depend on their favorableness. Therefore, suppose counternormative communicative acts are thought about more extensively and, therefore, are better recalled. Then, as implied by Hypothesis 3, the recall advantage of unfavorable behavior descriptions over favorable ones should be more pronounced when O provided these descriptions than when T himself provided them. Moreover, this difference should be evident regardless of whether subjects are told to form an impression of T or to form an impression of O.

7 Several significant interactions occurred involving both (a) the favorableness of a speaker’s trait description of the target and (b) the consistency of the behaviors mentioned with the speaker’s trait description of the target. These interactions, however, were attributable to the effects of the favorableness of the behaviors per se, independently of the characteristics of the speaker’s trait description. These effects are discussed later.
This hypothesis was supported. Specifically, behaviors mentioned by O were recalled substantially better if they were unfavorable than if they were favorable (.44 vs .32). In contrast, behaviors reported by T himself were recalled slightly better if they were favorable than if they were unfavorable (.38 vs .37). The interaction implied by these differences was significant, \( F(1, 176) = 19.75, p < .01 \), and independent of task objectives (\( F < 1 \)).

These data, therefore, support the hypothesis that subjects thought more extensively about statements O made that violated a conversational norm to be polite. Moreover, although the difference in the recall of favorable and unfavorable statements T mentioned is obviously too small to take seriously when viewed out of context, it is in the direction one would expect if subjects considered T's favorable self-descriptions to violate a norm to appear modest. The next experiment provided further evidence bearing on this possibility.

**Effects of task objectives (Hypothesis 4).** Subjects are likely to regard unfavorable behaviors, which derive from normative expectations (see Table 1), as more diagnostic of an actor's attributes and general likableness than favorable ones (Jones & Davis, 1965; Skowronske & Carlston, 1989). Consequently, the former behaviors should stimulate relatively more cognitive processing under conditions in which their semantic implications are relevant to judgments. Therefore, as implied by Hypothesis 4, this difference in processing should be more evident when subjects are told to form an impression of T than when they are told to form an impression of O. Recall differences support this hypothesis. Specifically, the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors over favorable ones was greater under target-impression conditions (.44 vs .36) than under other-impression conditions (.36 vs .34), \( F(1, 176) = 3.73, p < .06 \), and this was true regardless of whether the behaviors were reported by T or by O.

**Experiment 3**

Experiment 2 provided indirect evidence that when subjects receive information about a person in a social context, they consider the pragmatic implications of this information as well as its literal implications. Moreover, they think more extensively about information that deviates from normative expectations concerning what sorts of statements are socially appropriate and, therefore, have better recall of this information later. Experiment 3 replicated these findings under conditions in which the factors that contribute to subjects' recall and judgments could be more effectively isolated. Specifically, we constructed conditions in which subjects were told to focus on information from only one source rather than both. Subjects in target-impression, target-focus conditions were given only trait adjectives that the target used to describe himself and were told to form an impression of him on the basis of these adjectives and the behaviors that he mentioned during the conversation. In contrast, subjects in target-impression, other-focus conditions were given only the other speaker's trait descriptions of the target, but were told to form an impression of the target on the basis of this description and the behaviors mentioned by the other speaker. Finally, subjects in other-impression, other-focus conditions were also given the other speaker's trait description of the target but were told to use this description and the behaviors mentioned by the other speaker to form an impression of that speaker.

Not all of the hypotheses examined in Experiment 2 were expected to apply in these conditions. According to Hypothesis 2, for example, subjects use behaviors mentioned by the target to confirm their assumption that the other speaker's trait description of the target reflects a general disposition of the other speaker rather than attributes of the person being described. In the present study, however, subjects were told, under other-impression conditions, to consider only the information provided by the other speaker. Under these conditions, they are less likely to use the target's behaviors to confirm their impression of the other speaker, and so the effects implied by Hypothesis 2 are less apt to occur.

On the other hand, focusing subjects' attention on information from a single source was expected to increase their sensitivity to statements made by this source that violate a conversational norm and, therefore, to increase their efforts to identify these statements' pragmatic implications. This possibility seemed particularly important to consider in establishing the effects of a modesty norm on reactions to statements the target made about himself. As noted earlier, subjects in Experiment 2 appeared to use the target's statements about himself to confirm their impression of the other speaker. This cognitive activity may well have distracted them from recognizing the normative consistency of these statements. (This is particularly likely if, as we speculated earlier, several favorable self-descriptions are often necessary for subjects to perceive them as counternormative.) By decreasing subjects' tendency to use the target's statements as a basis for validating their impression of the other speaker, we expected to increase the effects of a modesty norm on their reactions to these statements and, therefore, on their later recall of the statements.

**Method**

**Subjects and Design**

The stimulus materials and general procedure used in this study were essentially identical to those used in Experiment 2. The only differences involved the instructions given subjects concerning their objectives in listening to the conversation and the fact that only one set of trait descriptions of the target was provided.

Thus, the experiment was essentially a two-factorial design involving three instructional conditions (target-impression, target-focus vs. target-impression, other-focus vs. other-impression, other-focus) and two levels of trait adjective favorableness. Subjects were 60 introductory psychology students who participated to fulfill a course requirement. Of these, 10 were randomly assigned to each experimental condition.

**Procedure**

The trait adjective descriptions and stimulus tapes were identical to those used in Experiment 2. Specifically, each of the stimulus tapes was administered to an equal number of subjects in each of the six experimental conditions.

After a preamble similar to that provided in Experiment 2, subjects in target-impression, target-focus conditions were told that we were interested in the impressions formed of people on the basis of what they say about themselves in the course of informal conversations, that they
would listen to a taped conversation between two students, and that they should try to form an impression of the person being described on the basis of things this person said about himself. Subjects in target-impression, other-focus conditions were told that we were interested in the impressions formed of people on the basis of what others say and that they should try to form an impression of the person being discussed on the basis of the way the other individual said about him. Finally, subjects in other-impression, other-focus conditions were told that we were interested in the impressions formed of people on the basis of what these people say about others and that they should try to form an impression of the person who was describing the other individual on the basis of what he said about this individual.

The study then proceeded as in Experiment 2. At the point in the tape at which the two speakers were asked to write down trait adjectives describing T, the tape was temporarily stopped and subjects were given either a set of adjectives that T had ostensibly used to describe himself (in target-impression, target-focus conditions) or a set that O had written down (in each of the two other-focus conditions). (Thus, the trait adjective descriptions were, in all cases, provided by only the information source on which subjects were told to focus their attention.) The adjectives pertained to either intelligence or kindness and were either favorable or unfavorable (as in Experiment 2). (The trait dimension to which the adjectives pertained was counterbalanced within each experimental condition).

After listening to the tape, subjects performed a 5-min interpolated task and were then asked to make judgments and to recall the statements made in the conversation, regardless of which person mentioned them. These data were subsequently scored in a manner similar to that used in Experiment 2.

### Results

**Judgments**

Subjects' liking for T, their liking for O, and their inferences that O liked T are shown in Table 3 as a function of the favorableness of the initial trait descriptions provided and instructional conditions. These data were evaluated in two sets of analyses. The first set evaluated the effects of T's self-description on judgments under target-impression, target-focus conditions. None of these effects was significant ($F < 1$). These null findings, therefore, replicate the results of Experiment 2 and strengthen the conclusion that T's trait descriptions of himself have little influence on subjects' liking for him. In particular, they suggest that the failure to observe this effect in the earlier experiment was not simply a result of information overload.

The second set of analyses examined the effects of O's trait descriptions of T in the other two conditions, in which subjects focused their attention on the information provided by O. The favorableness of O's trait description of T had a positive influence on subjects' liking for O in each of these conditions. Although the effect (averaged over the two other-focus conditions) was nonsignificant ($p > .10$), it paralleled that obtained both in Experiment 2 and in the earlier study by Wyer et al. (1990). Thus, it is consistent with the conclusion that when subjects are given a speaker's trait descriptions of another, they use these descriptions as a basis for evaluating the speaker rather than the person being described.

In contrast, the effect of O's description of T on perceptions that O liked T and on subjects' own liking for T depended on whether subjects were told to form an impression of T or an impression of O. These contingencies are confirmed by interac-

### Table 3

**Judgments of Speaker and Target as a Function of Task Objectives and Favorableness of Initial Trait Descriptions Provided: Experiment 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgment</th>
<th>Task objective</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Target impression, target focus</td>
<td>Target</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favorable trait description</td>
<td>impression</td>
<td>impression</td>
<td>impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfavorable trait description</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects' liking for T</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable trait description</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable trait description</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects' perception that O liked T</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable trait description</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. T = target; O = other speaker.
Recall

Effect of inconsistency. There was once again no evidence that the recall of behaviors was affected by their evaluative consistency with the trait description provided by the speaker who mentioned them. An analysis of the proportion of behaviors recalled as a function of task objectives, the speaker who mentioned the behaviors, and the consistency of the recalled behaviors with the trait description provided by the speaker yielded no significant effects involving consistency (\(p > .10\)). In particular, the behaviors that T mentioned under target-impression, target-focus conditions were recalled no better if they were inconsistent with T’s trait description of himself (\(M = .45\)) than if they were consistent with it (\(M = .42\)). Similarly, the behaviors O mentioned were recalled no better if they were inconsistent with O’s description of T than if they were consistent with it, and this was true regardless of whether subjects were told to form an impression of T (.48 vs. .47) or an impression of O (.38 vs. .46). Thus, the recall advantage of behaviors that are evaluatively inconsistent with initial trait descriptions, obtained in person memory studies in which the behaviors are presented out of their social context (Srull & Wyer, 1989), was not evident.

These data also bear on Hypothesis 2. According to this hypothesis, subjects think about behaviors T mentions that are inconsistent with O’s description of him to bolster their assumption that this description has little to do with T, but reflects a general disposition of O to respond favorably or unfavorably to others. However, because subjects in other-impression conditions of the present experiment were told to focus their attention on only information provided by O, these confirmatory processes were not expected to occur. In fact, this was the case. Subjects’ recall of behaviors that T mentioned was no different when the behaviors were inconsistent with O’s trait description of T than when they were consistent with it (\(F < 1\)), and this was true regardless of whether subjects were told to form an impression of T (.46 vs. .45) or to form an impression of O (.34 vs. .36).

Effect of conversational norms. The primary objective of the present experiment was to replicate the effects obtained in Experiment 2 concerning the influence of conversational norms (or, more accurately, violations of expectancies based on these norms) on the recall of the information presented. We expected that subjects would have better recall of unfavorable behaviors mentioned by O than of favorable ones. On the other hand, the behaviors T mentioned should, if anything, have a recall advantage if they are favorable and, therefore, violate normative expectations to appear modest and self-effacing.

Table 4 presents the proportion of favorable and unfavorable behaviors recalled in each condition as function of who mentioned them. As hypothesized, the behaviors mentioned by O were better recalled if they were unfavorable than if they were favorable (.49 vs. .39), whereas the behaviors mentioned by T were better recalled if they were favorable than if they were unfavorable (.45 vs. .38). The interaction of behavioral favorability and source implied by these differences was highly significant, \(F(1, 54) = 7.12, p < .01\).

As might also be expected, the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors mentioned by O was least when O’s statements were irrelevant to subjects’ primary impression formation objective (under target-impression, target-focus conditions), whereas the recall advantage of favorable behaviors mentioned by T was least when T’s behaviors were irrelevant to subjects’ objective (i.e., other-impression, other focus conditions). However, these between-conditions differences were not reliable (in each case, \(F < 1\)). Therefore, it appears that subjects were at least somewhat sensitive to the counternormativeness of the statements made about T even when these statements were not relevant to the impression they formed and were not part of the information they were asked to consider.

In summary, these data replicate results obtained in Experiment 2 concerning the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors that O mentioned. In addition, a recall advantage of favorable behaviors that T himself mentioned appeared. This difference, which is consistent with our speculation that favorable self-descriptions might violate a norm to appear modest, was much more evident in this experiment than in Experiment 2.

Effects of processing objectives. The recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors we observed in Experiment 2 was generally greater when subjects were told to form an impression of T than when they were told to form an impression of O. This was attributed to the greater diagnosticity of unfavorable behaviors than favorable ones (Jones & Davis, 1965; Rothbart & Park, 1986). Similar effects in the present experiment would be reflected in a greater recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors in the two target-impression conditions than in other-impression conditions. However, there was no support for this hypothesis. Pooled over the source of the behaviors, the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors over favorable ones was negligible under target-impression conditions (.45 vs. .44) and was trivially less in these conditions than it was under other-impression conditions (.42 vs. .36). Thus, differences in the literal implications of the behaviors conveyed in this experiment for characteristics of T had little influence on the attention that subjects paid to them.

General Discussion

The results of these experiments confirm our expectations that when subjects acquire information about people in a social context, they often focus their attention on the pragmatic implications of the information (i.e., why the information was con-
The information and in the judgments they make. Three sets of findings support this general conclusion.

First, subjects who learned a person's trait description of an acquaintance used this description as a basis for forming a concept of the source of the information rather than a concept of the person being described. Evidence of this, which was also obtained in earlier research (Wyer et al., 1990), occurred in Experiment 2 regardless of whether subjects were explicitly instructed to form an impression of the other speaker or were told to form an impression of the target. The tendency was weaker, but still evident, under similar conditions of Experiment 3. In contrast, the trait adjectives that the target used to describe himself had no influence on subjects' liking for him in either experiment.

Second, subjects in Experiment 2 had better recall of behaviors the target mentioned that were inconsistent with the other speaker's trait description of him and, therefore, confirmed their assumption that this description reflected the other speaker's likableness rather than attributes of the person to whom it referred. This difference replicates results obtained in our earlier research (Wyer et al., 1990).

Third, subjects had better recall of behaviors that the other speaker mentioned during the conversation if the behaviors were unfavorable (and, therefore, violated a norm to be polite) than if they were favorable. This difference was not apparent when the target himself mentioned performing the behaviors. In fact, subjects in Experiment 3 had better recall of behaviors that the target mentioned if these behaviors were favorable and therefore may have violated a norm to appear modest. To this extent, both sets of results reflect subjects' attention to the pragmatic implications of the behaviors selected by the experimenter in a social context and the more extensive processing that they devote to a construal of these implications when the information violates norm-based expectations for the communications that occur.

Some caution must be taken in drawing conclusions about the influence of conversational norms on reactions to the target's self-descriptions. For one thing, subjects' direct ratings of the appropriateness of making positive statements about oneself (Experiment 1) provided no evidence that favorable self-descriptions were, in fact, counternormative. However, it is conceivable that although mentioning a single unfavorable thing another person has done is considered inappropriate (i.e., impolite), the mention of several favorable things one has personally done may be necessary to create the appearance of arrogance and boastfulness. Therefore, the questions we asked subjects in Experiment 1 may not have been adequate to detect the existence of this norm.

This does not explain the difference between the results of Experiment 3 and those obtained in Experiment 2, in which the difference in recall of the target's favorable and unfavorable self-descriptions (although in the expected direction) was small and nonsignificant. In contrast to Experiment 3, however, subjects in Experiment 2 apparently used the target's behavior to confirm their interpretation of the other speaker's trait description of him as reflecting a general disposition of the other speaker rather than attributes of the target. Consequently, they may not have had the cognitive capacity necessary to identify and evaluate the counternormativeness of the target's self-descriptions as well. This would be particularly true if, as suggested earlier, several favorable self-descriptions in combination are necessary to be identified as counternormative.

Even so, it seems appropriate to conclude that, in contrast to its pragmatic implications, the literal implications of the behavioral information about the target had relatively little effect on the processing of this information. In Experiment 2, instructions to form an impression of the target increased the recall advantage of unfavorable behaviors, which were presumably more diagnostic of the target's attributes than were favorable ones (Jones & Davis, 1965; Skowronski & Carlson, 1989). However, this effect was not replicated in Experiment 3. Perhaps when subjects must reconcile the implications of two different trait descriptions of the target, they are more inclined to think about the literal implications of the behaviors than they would otherwise be, and so the differential diagnosticity of these behaviors is more likely to influence the amount of thought that subjects devoted to them. However, a further indication that the literal implications of the information played a relatively minor role in subjects' recall of the information is the failure to replicate results of earlier person memory research indicating that subjects have better recall of behaviors that are evaluatively inconsistent with initial trait descriptions of the actor (for a review, see Srull & Wyer, 1989). These effects have typically been attributed to subjects' more extensive processing of inconsistent behaviors in an effort to understand why they might have been performed. However, there was no evidence that subjects engaged in this processing in the present series of experiments.

Two factors seem likely to underlie the different results obtained in the present research (see also Wyer et al., 1990) than when information about a person is acquired out of its social context (cf. Srull & Wyer, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1989). First, as noted earlier, the initial trait descriptions of the target person that subjects were given in earlier person memory research were usually presented under conditions in which subjects had no reason to question their validity. Under these conditions, it is quite reasonable to suppose that subjects would base their liking for the target on these trait descriptions and would try to reconcile behaviors of the target that were inconsistent with them. In contrast, an acquaintance's trait descriptions of a target person that are conveyed in a social context are likely to be viewed as matters of opinion. Therefore, subjects are less likely to take them as serious characterizations of the target, rather, they consider them to reflect possible attributes of the speaker.

Second, subjects who read about a target's behavior in the typical person memory paradigm are likely to assume that the behaviors selected by the experimenter are representative of those the target had performed, and they do not question why these particular behaviors were selected. In contrast, behaviors that people mention in a social context are primarily conveyed with certain social motives in mind (e.g., to be polite or to create a favorable impression). Therefore, if the statements made in this context violate normative expectancies concerning what comments are appropriate, listeners may try to understand why the statements were made. The cognitive activity involved in these deliberations affects the recall of the behaviors described by these statements in ways that override the effects of the behaviors' literal implications.
Implications for Previous Theories of Person Memory

Our conclusions challenge several assumptions of the person memory model that has guided much of our previous research (cf. Srull & Wyer, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1989). This model assumes that behavioral information about a person is organized around a central concept that is formed on the basis of the initial (e.g., trait adjective) descriptions of that person. Moreover, once this concept is formed, judgments of the person are based on its implications without a review of the behavioral information that is received later. These assumptions are clearly contradicted by our judgment data. The initial trait descriptions of the target had no effect at all on evaluations of him. This means either that no concept of the target person was formed at all on the basis of the initial information provided about him or that this concept, although formed initially, did not provide the basis for subjects' later evaluations of him.

A second implication of the person memory model is that once a concept of the target person is formed on the basis of the initial information about him or her, a behavior of the target that is evaluatively inconsistent with the concept is thought about in relation to other behaviors in an attempt to reconcile its occurrence. This leads associations to be formed between the inconsistent behavior and others, and these associative linkages increase the behavior's accessibility in memory. Consequently, the inconsistent behaviors are often better remembered.

In the present research, however, there was no evidence that behaviors were recalled better if they were evaluatively inconsistent with the trait descriptions of the target provided by the speaker who mentioned them. Instead, they were often better remembered if they were inconsistent with normative expectations based on concepts and knowledge acquired outside the experimental situation. In this regard, Klein and Loftus (1988) have empirically distinguished between two processes that can affect the recall of new information. Organization involves thinking about different pieces of the information in relation to one another and, thereby, forming interitem associations. Elaboration involves thinking about the information in relation to previously acquired concepts and knowledge, producing associations between the individual pieces of information and these concepts. Both processes underlie the recall of information that is conveyed but are aware of their own role in transmitting and acquiring this information. Therefore, the cognitive representation they form on the basis of the conversation, and their later recall of it, may differ considerably from that suggested in the present research (for more detailed empirical and theoretical analyses of the structure of the representations formed of conversations in the present research paradigm, see Wyer et al., 1990). The present research provides insight into several issues that need to be explored in gaining a full theoretical and empirical understanding of impression formation in conversations and of the factors that need to be considered. However, much more work at both the conceptual and empirical levels remains.

References


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