Ability to take an out-group’s perspective in explaining positive and negative behaviors

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A total of 251 Latvian and Russian schoolteachers explained positive and negative behaviours from their own perspective and from the perspective of an ethnic out-group. The results were in line with the attributional pattern usually found in studies using Hewstone’s direct perspective of judgement, when participants are asked to take the perspective of an ethnic out-group. That is, there was an outcome effect in causal attributions for in-group actors and a categorization effect for negative behaviour from the imagined (out-group’s) perspective. The attributions from the direct perspective only partly replicated the commonly found pattern. The results support Montgomery’s perspective theory.

Key words: Causal attributions, perspectives, intergroup biases, ethnic groups.

Taylor and Jaggi (1974) were the first to demonstrate ethnocentricity of intergroup attributions, that is, members of a group favor members of that group over out-group members. The main function of in-group favoritism (Hewstone, 1989) is that the pattern of intergroup attributions provides a positive self-image, and thus intergroup attributions justify stereotypes of both the in-group and out-group. There are two possibilities for examining in-group biases (Fig. 1): categorization effects, which compare attributions for in-group vs. out-group members separately for positive and negative behaviors (e.g., a comparison of attributions to a positive behavior performed by an in-group with that performed by out-group actors); and outcome effects, which compare attributions separately for positive vs. negative behaviors for in-group and out-group members (e.g., a comparison of a positive and a negative behavior performed by either an in-group or an out-group) (Hewstone, 1990). Categorization effects favoring the in-group imply more dispositional attributions to positive in-group than out-group behavior and more dispositional attributions to negative out-group than in-group behavior. Outcome effects favoring the in-group typically imply more dispositional attributions to positive than negative in-group behavior and more dispositional attributions to negative than positive out-group behaviors.

Ethnocentricity bias in intergroup attributions has been found in different social and cultural contexts (see reviews by Hewstone, 1989, 1990). The categorization effect is more often found for negative behaviors than for positive behaviors. That is, there is more internal attribution for a negative act performed by an out-group member than for an in-group member, while less internal attribution to an out-group than to in-group member for positive acts has invariably been found. The outcome effect has been more often expressed when in-group actors’ behavior is explained. There is more internal attribution for positive than negative behaviors for in-group members, while there is generally not more internal attribution for negative than for positive out-group behavior.

The present study concerns intergroup attributions. Thus attributions to behavior are not linked to the individual characteristics of an actor, but instead explanations are assumed to be consistent with group stereotypes (Hewstone, 1990). Stereotypes, however, have a social dimension, since they are widely shared among the social groups of a certain society (Tajfel, 1981). This shared reality notion implies that the knowledge associated with a social category is experienced as objective, that is, as reliable, valid, general, and predictable (Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

Islam and Hewstone (1993) suggested four dimensions for describing intergroup attributions: locus of causality, stability,
controllability (all three from Weiner, 1986), and globality (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). Causal locus deals with person versus environment attributions, and the cause is located on internal–external continuum. Causal stability deals with fluctuation versus stability of attributed causes. Causal controllability deals with attributing volitional control to an individual's behavior. Causal globality describes whether the cause is specific to a given situation or is more general in nature. Since in the case of intergroup attribution individual behavior is not explained by individual characteristics but by reference to stereotypes of both the in-group and out-group, one should expect that positive in-group behaviors and negative out-group behaviors receive more internal, stable, controllable, and global attributions (or more dispositional attributions across all the dimensions). The reverse pattern should be expected for negative in-group and positive out-group behaviors (or more situational attributions across all the dimensions). Such a pattern of attributions would imply more consistency with respect to an overall evaluation of the target. Hence, in the present study, the four dimensions of attribution were expected to offer a broad range of related dimensions people use when explaining behavioral causes.

However, there are situations when people have to recognize that different “truths” coexist. It is an aim of communication to achieve a shared reality among “owners of different truths”, which is achieved through a reciprocal perspective taking (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). In other words, successful communication requires one to perceive and grasp the situation as it is perceived and grasped by the other, including the ability to acknowledge the difference in one's own and others' perspectives. To imagine the other's perspective is an important part of rhetoric thinking, as described by Billig (1991). People think in an argumentative way, to be ready to convince somebody (in the case of intergroup relations it may be an out-group member) of one's point of view. Thus, counter arguments are developed as potential opponents' future arguments. To be able to produce arguments that may be useful in future intergroup argumentation, a person has to take the out-group's perspective on the issue in question. Probably people have to imagine themselves as being an out-group member.

People's ability to take the perspective of another group has been demonstrated in several studies. Fussel and Krauss (1991) showed that people are able to infer information about others' knowledge, if asked to take others' perspectives. Zukier and Pepitone (1984) found that, depending on the task, subjects could take a scientific or clinical perspective in a judgmental task. The results showed that a scientific position enhanced the use of base-rate information, while a clinical position enhanced individualizing information. Kendal and Montgomery (in press) found that both researchers using animal experimentation and people protesting against animal experimentation were able to explain the different attitudes to the issue from the opponents' perspective, that is, both groups were able to guess each other's answers when changing perspectives.

The present study examined competence in explaining behaviors performed by in-group members and out-group members from one's own and from an out-group's perspective. Specifically, the study was designed to assess whether people will display ethnocentric attributions also if asked to take an out-group's (imagined) perspective and not only their own (direct) perspective. Both the ideas of shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996) and rhetoric thinking (Billig, 1991) suggest that such an ability exists. More precise hypotheses were developed on the basis of Montgomery's (1994) perspective theory.

Montgomery (1994) argues that perception of and thinking about an object involves three factors determining the judgment: subject orientation or perspective of the cognition (e.g., adoption of social roles, or identifying oneself with a person or group of persons); relationships between features thought of as important in the object (what features are noticed or captured in the object); and the psychological distance to the object (an object may be experienced as more or less close to one's interests, and the closer the distance to the object, the smaller will be the differentiation between more and less relevant features). When judging an in-group member from the direct perspective, one takes a “we”-oriented, inside perspective, from which the object (person) is seen as affiliated with “us”, having “our” dispositions. When judging an out-group member from the direct perspective, one does it from a “we”-oriented, outside perspective, from which the object (person) is seen as something differing from “us” and having its own dispositions. Normally, we would expect that the inside (direct) perspective on in-group and the outside (direct) perspective on out-group members will make it possible to achieve both a positive self-image and to justify stereotypes of both the in-group and out-group. Following Montgomery's (1994) perspective theory, one should expect a change in one's interests associated with a certain perspective – what was previously outside becomes inside, and what was inside becomes outside. That is, by taking the out-group's (imagined) perspective, we becomes they, and they becomes we, and people's judgments become dependent on what they think has to be achieved from the other's positions.

The following pattern of attributions is expected from the imagined perspective (note that the targets of judgment – in-group and out-group actors – are the same, and that it is the perspective of judgement that is different): (1) There is more dispositional attribution for an out-group member in comparison with an in-group member in the case of positive behavior, and there is more dispositional attribution for an in-group than out-group member in the case of negative behavior (the imagined categorization effect); (2) There is more dispositional attribution for a negative than a positive behavior performed by an in-group actor, and more dispositional attribution for a positive than negative behavior performed by an out-group actor (the imagined outcome effect).
METHOD

Participants and design
The study was conducted in Latvia, which has a population of 2.5 million, of which Latvians constitute 55.7% and Russians, the largest ethnic minority, 32.3% (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 1999). Both ethnic groups represent meaningful categories with a long history of interaction, so they were chosen to represent natural categories. Schools in Latvia use either the Latvian or Russian language for teaching.

The sample consisted of 251 schoolteachers – 131 Latvians (116 females) and 120 Russians (109 females). The participants were sampled to cover three different regions of Latvia with different proportions of Latvians and Russians: one with a Latvian majority, another with a Russian majority, and the third with approximately equal proportions of the two ethnicities. The study followed a factorial design with repeated measures on the last three factors.

Stimulus materials
The behaviors were presented in the form of cartoons. There were two reasons for using cartoons in preference to other forms of stimulus presentation (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). First, a cartoon is a language-free form of presentation (and therefore adjectives, for example, express more dispositional attributions – see Semin & Fiedler, 1988); hence the abstraction level of presentation does not bias subjects’ attributions. Second, cartoons allow systematic variation of an actor’s group membership. In the present study the actor’s group membership was made distinct by marking an actor with a letter A and a statement that “person A on the picture is a Latvian/Russian living in Latvia”.

In a pilot study, 45 undergraduate students (24 Russians and 21 Latvians) rated the social desirability of 12 cartoons on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (socially very undesirable) to +3 (socially very desirable), with a neutral midpoint of 0. The pilot study participants were also asked to indicate what the persons portrayed in the cartoons were doing. The language of the questionnaires corresponded to the participants’ ethnicity. Cartoons had to satisfy the following criteria to be included in the main study: (1) the understanding of the portrayed behaviors had to be consistent with what was intended; (2) the behaviors had to be judged distinctively positive (> +2) or negative (< −2); (3) the differences between ethnic groups in the social desirability attached to the behaviors displayed in the cartoons had to be insignificant. After this pretesting procedure, two cartoons portraying positive and two portraying negative behaviors were chosen (see Fig. 2). The positive behaviors were a person assisting an elderly woman to get up after a fall (M_Latvians = 2.90, M_Russians = 2.42) and a person helping a blind man (M_Latvians = 2.90, M_Russians = 2.92). The negative behaviors were a person breaking a tree (M_Latvians = −2.67, M_Russians = −2.46) and a person stealing from someone’s bag (M_Latvians = −2.81, M_Russians = −2.83). The ethnic differences in the social desirability ratings for all the four cartoons were not significant at p = 0.05.

Procedure
Each participant received a questionnaire in his or her native language with the two cartoons portraying positive and the two negative behaviors. The same behavior was marked as performed either by a Latvian on one half or by a Russian on the other half of the questionnaires. Each participant rated all four cartoons (one positive and one negative behavior for each target). The order of the cartoons in the questionnaire was counterbalanced across participants, yielding a total of 16 versions of the questionnaire.

The participants first had to describe causes for the behavior depicted in the cartoons from their own perspective. They were asked, “What do you think”, followed by four questions representing four causal dimensions. For causal locus it was asked to what extent the causes of behavior were something about person A versus the situation. For causal stability it was asked to what extent the causes of A’s behavior were something stable versus unstable over time. Controllability was assessed by asking to what extent A controlled his or her own behavior. For globality it was asked to what extent the cause would generalize to other situations. All ratings were made on seven-point rating scales, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The questions reflecting the own (direct) perspective of the respondent were followed by questions about how they thought a Latvian/Russian living in Latvia would answer the same questions on the four causal dimensions (the imagined perspective).

RESULTS
First, index variables were calculated as means across all four causal dimensions. Cronbach’s alphas varied between 0.87 (imagined attributions for positive behaviors of the in-group by Russians) and 0.61 (direct attributions for negative behaviors of the in-group by Latvians) and had a mean of 0.76. Means and standard deviations of the index variables are presented in Table 1.

A preliminary 2 (ethnicity of participants) × 2 (version of cartoons) × 2 (perspective: direct vs. imagined) × 2 (target: in-group vs. out-group actor) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative acts on cartoons) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with
Table 1. Mean ratings across causal dimensions as a function of ethnic group of actor, valence of behaviour, and perspective of attribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group of subject and perspective of attribution</th>
<th>Ethnic group of actor</th>
<th>Positive behavior</th>
<th>Negative behavior</th>
<th>Positive behavior</th>
<th>Negative behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latvian</td>
<td>In-group</td>
<td>5.84&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.36&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.61&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.19&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagined</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.42&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>4.55&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.27&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>4.98&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>5.84&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.07&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.48&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5.15&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagined</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Subscripts a, b, and c indicate a horizontal within-group comparison. Subscripts 1, 2 and 3 indicate vertical comparisons across columns. Means in each row and column that do not share at least one common subscript letter or number are significantly different (least significant difference test, \( p < 0.05 \)). Higher values indicate more dispositional attributions.

repeated measures on the last three factors did not produce neither a significant main effect of version nor any significant interactions involving this factor. Thus, version was excluded from the later analysis. The results reported are thus based on a four-way 2 (ethnicity of subjects) × 2 (perspective: direct vs. imagined) × 2 × (target: in-group vs. out-group) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative acts on cartoons) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last three factors.

The most important result was a significant perspective × target × valence interaction, \( F(1, 219) = 25.79, \ p < 0.001 \). There was also a significant main effect of perspective, \( F(1, 219) = 31.93, \ p < 0.001 \), showing that there was a general tendency to use more dispositional attributions if a direct perspective was employed (\( M \) for direct perspective = 5.44, \( M \) for imagined perspective = 5.11). There was also a significant effect of valence, \( F(1, 219) = 49.08, \ p < 0.001 \), with the use of more dispositional attributions to describe positive behavior (\( M \) for positive behavior = 5.50, \( M \) for negative behavior = 5.06).

Besides these interactions, Latvians had a greater difference between the direct (\( M = 5.50 \)) and the imagined (\( M = 5.05 \)) perspectives than had Russians (\( M \) for direct perspective = 5.39 and \( M \) for imagined perspective = 5.23), as shown by the ethnicity × Perspective interaction, \( F(1, 219) = 7.33, \ p < 0.01 \). The significant ethnicity × perspective – valence interaction, \( F(1, 219) = 6.69, \ p < 0.01 \), suggested that, besides the general tendency to employ less dispositional attributions for the imagined perspective, Russians gave more dispositional attributions for negative behaviors in the imagined perspective.

Then, in accordance with suggestions by Hewstone (1990), post hoc tests were computed to examine both effects for both perspectives: categorization effects, comparing attributions for in-group vs. out-group members separately for positive and negative behaviors, and outcome effects, comparing attributions separately for positive vs. negative behaviors for in-group and out-group members. As seen in Table 1, for the direct perspective there was a clear outcome effect for both Latvians and Russians when subjects explained in-group behaviors, that is, there were more dispositional attributions for positive than for negative actions. This effect was more pronounced for Russian subjects. Meanwhile, the outcome effect for explaining out-group actions was in the opposite direction to that expected: both ethnic groups gave more dispositional explanations for positive out-group behaviors in comparison to negative out-group behaviors and this pattern was more marked for Latvian subjects. The categorization effect for the direct perspective was present for Russian participants when explaining positive behavior, while Latvian subjects displayed the pattern opposite to that predicted: both ethnic groups gave more dispositional attributions for positive than for negative actions. The imagined outcome effect was not present for Russian subjects when they explained out-group behaviors, but Latvian subjects exhibited the pattern opposite to that predicted. The imagined perspective also gave a clear imagined categorization effect for explaining negative behaviors inasmuch as participants of both ethnic groups were more dispositional in explaining out-group than in-group behaviors. On the other hand, members of neither ethnic group displayed the imagined categorization effect for attributing positive behaviors.

**DISCUSSION**

The question posed in the present study was whether members of different ethnic groups are able to take the perspective of the other group when explaining positive and negative behaviors performed both by in-group and out-group members. The participants had to take both direct (own) and imagined (out-group’s) perspectives during the experimental task. The results obtained from the imagined perspective showed that both Latvian and Russian subjects reproduced both imagined outcome and imagined categorization effects in their most commonly found form (Hewstone, 1990), when participants are asked to take the direct perspective. That is, there were instances for the imagined outcome effect in causal attributions for in-group actors and the imagined categorization effect for negative behavior which are consistent with Montgomery’s (1994) perspective
theory. When it comes to taking the out-group's perspective, the object (out-group actor) is seen as behaving in line with his or her interests or dispositions. What one thinks to be important for out-group members is to have positive (and benevolent) representation of their group. This was what the results showed: attributions from the imagined perspective made it possible to consider the imagined in-group as more benevolent than the imagined out-group.

Generally, there are two plausible mechanisms for this ability to think from the out-group's perspective. First, it may be dependent on the retrieval of stereotypes and, second, the participants might have truly identified with the out-group. It has been argued that stereotypes may provide a basis for explaining both in-group and out-group behavior (Deschamps, 1983; Hewstone, 1989) and stereotypes in real-life situations are negotiated inasmuch as members of a social group present themselves in a certain way and want others to accept this presentation (Lange & Westin, 1985; Liebkind, 1992). Members of different ethnic groups within a society negotiate their identity through mass media, declarations, and the interactions of individual members (Liebkind, 1992). This would imply that people know very well what different out-groups think of their membership group. Although it is not possible to deny that participants during the experimental task had access to the socially circulating stereotypes, there are several arguments in favor of another explanation, that the pattern of attributions from the imagined perspective was due to a true identification with the out-group's motivations and caused imagined ethnocentric biases.

The first argument comes from a study of perspective taking as a strategy for dismissing stereotype expression (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Galinsky and Moskowitz found that taking another's perspective diminishes the accessibility of stereotypes associated with another's group membership. Another argument is based on the present study as participants did not use a “reflection” of attributions made by a real out-group from the direct perspective. The judgments from the imagined perspective favored the in-group more, and were, hence, less “accurate” in reflecting the socially circulating information.

It might be argued that the use of a within-subjects study design could provoke the use of an intergroup differentiation strategy by tapping different attributional patterns from the imagined than from the direct perspective. A study by Austers and Montgomery (2001) using a between-subjects design found that participants in their explanations of the out-group's political actions, when asked to take the out-group's perspective, named externally anchored reasons reflecting the out-group's motivation. These findings speak against the possibility that the differences in judgments were caused only by the within-subjects study design.

The present study did not completely replicate the usual pattern of attributions from the direct perspective. That is, there was a clear outcome effect (for the out-group target) for both Latvian and Russian subjects in the opposite direction to that expected. This lack of replication does not seem to be uncommon. For instance, Hewstone, Wagner and Machleit (1989) found that Turkish pupils did not show intergroup bias in achievement attributions for German and Turkish schoolchildren. One plausible explanation for the lack of the outcome effect may be related to theories describing subtle prejudice. People do not want to be perceived as being biased explicitly, unless there is a context providing justification for biased behavior (see review by Fiske, 1998). In contrast, the imagined perspective might be suitable for such a justification, allowing projection of less conscious beliefs and cognitions, while the direct perspective might follow cultural norms posing restrictions on being openly biased to out-group members. The cultural norms may be particularly strong in the case of the type of the sample assessed in the present study – one may expect that schoolteachers are some of the less prejudiced members of society. The results of the present study also showed that the two largest ethnic groups living in Latvia both attribute causes to out-group members in a similar way as to the in-group members. If considering Struch and Schwartz’s (1989) finding that the perceived level of intergroup conflict relates to the perceived inhumanity of traits, this result is understandable. If conflict were present, one should expect to find highly dispositional attributions for negative out-group behaviors, which was not the case in the present study. One would not expect to find such a pattern of intergroup attributions as there are no indicators of a high level of intergroup conflict within Latvian society. Taken together, the less biased judgments from the direct perspective in comparison with the more biased judgments from the imagined perspective seem to reflect the ability to judge from the out-group's positions by identifying oneself with out-group's motivations, not only using stereotypical information.

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