

# Multiple Meanings of Behavior: Construing Actions in Terms of Competence or Morality

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Multiplicity of behavior features gives rise to its different interpretations (in addition to behavior vagueness and ambiguity typically studied in social cognition research). Particularly, identical actions are construable both in moral and competence-related categories due to distinct behavioral features underlying each of these interpretations. It was hypothesized that the two construals are alternatively used by the perceiver. Because of perspective-dependent differences in accessibility and applicability of competence and moral categories, it was hypothesized that actors interpret their own behavior in competence terms, whereas observers interpret it in moral categories, and that within the actor perspective, competence construal is used to a higher degree by male than female perceivers, but the opposite is true for moral construal. These hypotheses were supported in Study 1, where 115 students interpreted identical actions (encodable both in competence and moral terms) from the actor or the observer perspective, and in Study 2, where 65 students recollected and interpreted real-life episodes that had led them to strong evaluations either of themselves or other persons.

## Bases of Multiple Behavior Meanings

A good deal of research suggests that human behavior is frequently amenable to different interpretations. Most behavioral acts are instances of more than one trait category (Angleitner & Demtröder, 1988; Borkenau, 1986), and identical behavioral information may result in different descriptive and evaluative inferences (Higgins, 1989; Ross & Nisbett, 1990). Although it is quite clear what determines activation and use of knowledge structures in encoding behavioral information, it is much less clear what in behavior itself promotes its equivocality. What renders the same behavior amenable to different interpretations?

Higgins (1989) provided part of an answer to this question in his discussion of vague and ambiguous behavioral input used in construct accessibility research. An input is *vague* when it consists of a set of behaviors that has enough features associated with a particular construct (e.g., *hostility* trait) that the construct may be applied to the set but does not have enough such features to secure an inevitable use of this particular construct. An input is *ambiguous* when a behavior has features associated to the same degree with two constructs that are descriptively similar but imply discrepant evaluations (e.g., *adventurous-reckless*). Whether a construct is applied to a vague behavior (Srull & Wyer, 1979), or whether one or another construct is applied to ambiguous behavior (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977), depends on the construct activation level. Clearly, on

both occasions the interpretation decisions are assumed to rely on the same features of the categorized behavior: What changes the interpretation is a change in accessibility of particular constructs, and whichever of them is applied, its use is based on the same features of the categorized behavior.

However, even a simple behavioral act can have a number of different features (e.g., a welcome may be polite, formal, and short, all at the same time), and there is no reason why all interpretations of the act should be based on the same set of features. On the contrary, limited information-processing capacity and unequal salience of different behavioral features (Wyer & Srull, 1989) suggest that only a subset of features is actually used to build up any behavior construal. It is proposed, therefore, that in addition to vagueness and ambiguity, multiplicity of features is another reason for which a behavior is amenable to different interpretations alternatively used by the perceiver.

Such a possibility is suggested by Carlston's (1980) research on "multiple implication episodes," that is, behaviors implying two different traits, such as making an accurate but unflattering remark to a friend, which implies both honesty and unkindness. Unfortunately, Carlston's multiple implication episodes involved always a positive and a negative trait, which made them evaluatively ambiguous, and this ambivalence coincided with the multiplicity (duality) of behavioral features. The present approach assumes, however, that different features of the same act allow its alternative construals even if the features are neither vague nor ambiguous. The only behavior-related condition is that the features are distinct from each other and associated with different (but not necessarily contradictory) categories that can be used in behavior interpretation.

## Competence and Moral Categories of Behavior Construal

For several reasons, the actor's intended goal and efficiency of the goal attainment have been chosen as behavior features studied in the present research. First, these two features are crucial

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characteristics of social behavior because the intended goal is paramount in deciding whether an action is moral (Karniol, 1978; Shultz & Wright, 1985), whereas efficiency of goal attainment is paramount in determining the actor's competence and abilities (Darley & Goethals, 1980; Heider, 1958). Second, morality and competence constitute two relatively independent meanings of personality traits, as suggested by the classical Rosenberg, Nelson, and Vivekananthan (1968) study on dimensions underlying trait co-occurrences in personality impressions.

Finally, moral contents of the actor's goal and efficiency of goal attainment are clearly orthogonal: Both moral and immoral actions can be successful, indicating competence of the actor, but both types of goals can also remain unattained, thus showing the actor's incompetence. This suggests a 2 × 2 classification of actions with respect to their construal in moral and competence-related terms, as illustrated in Table 1. The first type of action is virtuous success, in which the action goal is moral and successfully achieved (e.g., rescuing a drowning person); the second is virtuous failure, in which the actor aims at a moral goal but fails to achieve it (e.g., failing to rescue a drowning person); the third is sinful success, in which the goal is immoral and successfully achieved (e.g., undetected cheating on an exam); and the final type of action is sinful failure, in which the actor fails to achieve an intended immoral goal (e.g., being caught cheating on an exam).

Although each type of action is potentially interpretable in both moral and competence terms, the present hypothesis of alternativity of construals predicts that people tend to interpret each action in a single way: either in terms of morality or in terms of competence. Operationally, that means an expectation of strong negative correlations between construing a behavior in moral and competence terms.

Two types of action (virtuous failure and sinful success) involve ambivalent episodes in which one of the interpretations is negative but the other is positive. The two remaining actions (virtuous success and sinful failure) refer to univalent episodes, in which both interpretations are either positive or negative. Comparisons between these pairs of actions help to decide whether evaluative ambiguity of behavior features is a necessary precondition for alternative construals of the same behavior (as implied by Higgins's, 1989, analyses and Carlston's, 1980, results) or whether the mere existence of independent behavior features is enough to allow the alternativity of behavior construal, as suggested by the present feature multiplicity analysis. If evaluative ambiguity is necessary, then negative correlations between moral and competence construals of the same action should be obtained only for the ambivalent actions (virtuous failure and sinful success). If, however, the mere multiplicity

(duality) of features is sufficient, the univalent actions (virtuous success and sinful failure) should elicit such negative correlations as well.

### Factors Determining the Use of Moral and Competence Categories

Because the two category types are expected to be alternatively used in behavior construal, it is important to consider what determines their use by the perceiver. The relative accessibility of the categories is an obvious factor (cf. Higgins, 1989). However, even a highly accessible piece of knowledge is not used to encode behavioral information (Martin, 1986) or to formulate a judgment (Schwarz & Bless, in press), if the perceiver regards it as inapplicable to a current cognitive task. Applicability of a category to input stimuli involves two components: the input–category relatedness and the perceived applicability of a category to given input (Higgins, 1989). The former does not refer to the relation between all features of an input and all features of a category but rather to overlap between category features and those input features that are noticed, and attended to, by the perceiver. The relative overlap between an input and different categories varies depending on which input features are being focused on (Trope & Ginossar, 1988), and therefore the relative salience of different input features plays an important role in the stimulus–category relatedness. The latter component, perceived applicability, refers to the extent to which perceivers consider a category relevant for use in a current task (which is frequently based on their goals and motives) and regard its use as appropriate in the circumstances (which is frequently based on the perceiver's normative beliefs).

It is hypothesized that the relative applicability of moral and competence categories to the behaviors analyzed in Table 1 is affected by two omnibus variables naturally intervening in most social situations: the actor–observer differentiation of perspective and the perceiver's sex.

#### *Actor–Observer Perspective*

The actor–observer perspective differentiation accompanies virtually all social interactions: Any social action can be considered either from the perspective of its perpetrator or observer. Because different features of behavior are salient in the two perspectives (and different mental categories are relevant in them), actors are predicted to interpret their own behavior in competence rather than moral terms, whereas observers are predicted to prefer moral interpretations of the same behavior. Entertaining the actor position, individuals strive to achieve their currently pursued goals and are preoccupied with themselves as active agents. Among the mechanisms of personal agency, people's self-efficacy beliefs play a central role in determining motivation and action, as shown by Bandura (1989) and his colleagues in a long line of research. Because focus on competence-related features of an action is necessary to improve its efficiency (and frequently to reach its goal at all), those action features are typically salient for the action performer.

Observers, however, not being responsible for efficient action execution, are less focused on the competence of an ongoing action (unless they approach actors with a specific interest in

Table 1  
*The Independence of Competence and Moral Interpretation of Behavior and the Resulting Four-Fold Classification of Actions*

Competence interpretation	Moral interpretation	
	Positive	Negative
Positive	a: Virtuous success	c: Sinful success
Negative	b: Virtuous failure	d: Sinful failure

their abilities, for example, when making employment decisions). Rather, they focus on the actor's goal because its identification is crucial for the understanding of what the actor is doing and for drawing inferences about his or her traits (many of which are themselves goal-based categories, as shown by Read, Jones, & Miller, 1990).

Moreover, moral categories of behavior encoding are typically more relevant for the observer's interests than the competence-related ones. Usually, the actor's immoral behavior is harmful to other people, whereas his or her moral behavior is beneficial to them. Observers are involved as targets of those harms or benefits, either actually (when they are recipients of an action) or potentially (by an anticipation of what would happen to them if they confronted the actor). Because people tend to construe behavior in categories relevant to their interests and goals (Bruner, 1957; Srull & Wyer, 1986), observers prefer to interpret others' behavior in moral rather than competence terms. The latter are of some importance to observers on the condition that the actor's competence leads to a higher efficiency in inflicting harms or benefits. For actors, however, their own competence is unconditionally important (whatever they intend to do, its better for them to do it efficiently), and therefore competence categories are more relevant in the actor than the observer perspective (cf. Peeters & Czapinski, 1990, for a similar analysis).

Both the salience and relevance considerations imply, then, that actors will interpret their own behavior in competence rather than moral terms, whereas observers will prefer moral interpretation of the same behavior. As far as evaluative impressions formulated by actors and observers are underlaid by these differences in behavior construal, the two should formulate either similar or dissimilar evaluations, depending on the action type. For those action types for which the two interpretations have convergent evaluative bearings (e.g., virtuous success), actors and observers should yield similar impressions. For those action types, however, for which the two interpretations lead to discrepant evaluations (e.g., sinful success), impressions reported by actors and observers should diverge.

#### *Perceiver's Sex*

In the traditional sex role stereotypes, caring for others' needs and well-being is considered the domain of women rather than men, whereas task orientation and striving for occupational achievement and excellence is considered the domain of men rather than women. Although in modern societies the sex role stereotypes decrease in their scope and intensity, they are still being built into people's self-identities. In the course of socialization, boys and men learn to a greater extent than girls and women that competence categories are appropriate for construing their behavior, whereas girls and women learn more than boys and men that moral categories are appropriate for construing their own conduct (Eagly, 1987). This is directly suggested by Hoffman's (1975) results showing that both boys and their fathers place greater normative emphasis on achievement than girls and their mothers, whereas girls and their mothers more often emphasize consideration for others.

These differential socialization practices may result in two between-sex differences in behavior construal. The first is a

difference in chronic accessibility of competence and moral categories—the former can be more accessible in male than female perceivers, whereas the latter can be more accessible in female than male perceivers. In effect, male perceivers would tend to construe behavior in competence terms, whereas female perceivers would tend to view both their own behavior and that of others in moral terms. The second possible sex difference pertains to the appropriate construal of the perceiver's own behavior: Competence categories may be seen as more appropriate by male than female perceivers, whereas moral categories may be seen as more appropriate by female than male perceivers. In effect, male perceivers would prefer competence categories and female perceivers moral ones, but only when construing their own actions.

Because the sex differences in socialization pertain to what is an appropriate way to construe the meaning of a child's own behavior (rather than of human behavior in general), the second of the discussed sex differences in construal is expected: Within the actor perspective, male perceivers will construe their own behavior in competence terms to a higher degree than female perceivers, whereas the opposite will be true for moral interpretations.

#### Summary of the Hypotheses

To summarize, it is expected that the mere multiplicity of behavior features enables different interpretations of the behavior. The same actions are construable both in moral and competence terms due to distinct behavior features underlying the two interpretations. These two construals will be alternatively used and will involve differential evaluative impressions.

The actor-observer perspective and the subject's sex are expected to determine whether competence or moral categories are used to construe the same behavior. Actors will interpret their behavior in competence rather than moral terms, but observers will prefer its moral interpretation. Within the actor perspective, competence categories will be used to a higher degree by male than female subjects, but the opposite will be true for moral categories.

#### Overview of Research

These hypotheses were tested in two studies. In Study 1, subjects were asked to assume the actor or the observer perspective and were presented with descriptions of actions interpretable in terms of both competence and morality. In Study 2, subjects recollected some real, self-, or other-related episodes that were then analyzed for the presence of moral and competence considerations in subjects' thinking about them.

Thereby, methods used in the two studies complemented each other in their strong and weak points. In Study 1 (experimental design), identical behavioral information was interpreted from the two perspectives. However, this information was specially prepared to be interpretable both in competence and moral categories, and the perspective was induced in quite an artificial way. In Study 2 (correlational design), behavioral information was recollected by subjects from their own past, and therefore its content varied in an uncontrolled way. However, the researcher had not tampered with this information, and it

referred to real-life, emotionally involving episodes in which subjects spontaneously used either of the perspectives.

### Study 1

The perspective induction was manipulated in two ways. In role-playing conditions, subjects were asked to imagine themselves taking part in consecutive episodes (as actors or observers) and to report the interpretations and evaluations they themselves would make in those situations. In thought-reconstruction conditions, subjects were to guess responses of the persons (actors or observers) described in the episodes rather than to directly report ideas about their own imagined responses to the situations described.

The actor-observer perspective was manipulated in these different ways for two reasons. First, two types of manipulation simply increase the generalizability of results. Second, though the role playing seems to be the easiest way to induce the actor-observer difference in perspective, this manipulation involves self-presentation concerns. Individuals, by showing how they evaluate and understand human actions, show who they are, and there is no doubt that usually people want to show themselves in a positive light. This may bias their presented behavior construal, especially of their own (even hypothetical) actions, where, for example, the focus on competence could be read as a socially undesirable neglect of moral considerations. This potential source of bias is absent in the thought-reconstruction conditions, where people only reconstruct others' understanding of behavior and cannot be held responsible for its content.

### Method

#### Subjects and Design

Sixty male and 60 female university students participated. Five subjects yielded incomplete data; responses of the remaining 115 participants were subjected to a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 \times 2$  analysis of variance (ANOVA), in which the first three (perspective, mode of perspective induction, and sex) were between-subjects factors and the remaining two (action type, according to Table 1, and interpretation content) were within-subjects factors.

#### Materials

Stimulus materials came from an initial pool of 20 one-paragraph (60–80 words) descriptions of episodes representing the action types shown in Table 1. These descriptions were presented to 55 psychology students who had been informed on the action classification and asked to sort the episodes, deciding which belonged to which cell (a fifth possibility, "does not fit at all," was also available). Two episodes per cell that had been classified in the most unanimous way (85% of subjects or more agreed on their identification) were selected for the present study.

The episodes involved the following actions: 1. thanks to her excellent driving, the actor saved a dog that suddenly ran into the street, 2. the actor successfully instructed his friend in mathematics, 3. trying to cheer up her younger brother, the actor was so clumsy that she actually depressed him, 4. the actor unsuccessfully tried to persuade his teenage daughter to return surplus money, 5. under a smart pretext, a manager (the actor) left a conference to avoid answering an inconvenient question, 6. the actor pushed himself in front of a line of people and bought the last two bottles of milk, 7. under a false pretext the actor refused to

help her friend, but was found out due to her own stupidity, 8. the actor ingratiated to her boss in such an obvious way that it infuriated the boss.

Two episodes for each action type increased reliability of the relevant measures and helped to disentangle effects of the acting person's sex from the specific action content. To this effect, half of the subjects responded to Episodes 1, 3, 5, and 7 with male actors and to Episodes 2, 4, 6, and 8 with female actors. The other half responded to Episodes 1, 3, 5, and 7 with female, and to Episodes 2, 4, 6, and 8 with male, actors.

#### Procedure

Subjects were tested in groups of 5 to 10. Each subject received a booklet containing all eight episodes in a random order and preceded by one training episode. After reading an episode, subjects were asked to name the described action with one word, to formulate a general evaluation of the acting person, and, finally, to write down a rationale for their evaluations. Once all of the responses to one episode were made, subjects moved on to the next sheet and episode.

For half of the subjects, the actor or observer perspective was induced by a role-playing procedure, whereas for the remainder it was induced by means of a thought-reconstruction manipulation. In the role-playing conditions, the study was introduced as dealing with the perception and evaluation of social behavior from the perspective of either an acting person or an observer. Subjects were asked to picture themselves either performing or observing the actions described in episodes and to imagine what they would think as the actor or observer of each episode. In the thought-reconstruction procedure subjects were asked to reconstruct probable responses of acting persons (the actor condition) or action recipients (the observer condition). Instead of putting themselves into the role of an actor or an observer, subjects were simply asked to guess what the appropriate person would think about the episode.

#### Dependent Measures

*Behavior interpretation.* The first measure of behavior construal was based on the one-word behavior descriptors. Descriptors yielded by all subjects in response to all eight episodes were compiled into one alphabetical list that contained 252 words or short phrases (many of them synonymous, for example, *lack of intelligence*, *stupidity*, *dumb*, and *idiot*). The list was rated by two judges for the degree to which the consecutive descriptors pertained to morality on a 7-point scale. The interrater agreement was substantial,  $r(251) = .79$ , and the ratings were averaged, providing the behavior descriptor index of moral interpretation. Another pair of judges rated the same list for the degree to which the descriptors pertained to competence. In this case, the interrater agreement was also high,  $r(251) = .78$ , and the ratings were also averaged.

The second measure of construal was based on the content of evaluation rationale formulated by subjects. Another pair of judges, unaware of experimental conditions and behavior descriptors, was presented with consecutive evaluations, and their rationale was elicited from the subjects. The judges rated each rationale on a scale ranging from 0 (*does not involve morality at all*) to 6 (*the rationale strongly involves moral considerations*). A similar format was used for competence ratings. Ratings were made in eight blocks, each block referring to one episode. The interrater agreement was  $r(114) = .82$  for morality and  $r(114) = .80$  for competence judgment (means averaged over eight blocks; Fisher's  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation was used). Ratings of the two judges were averaged, providing the evaluation rationale indices of moral and competence interpretation, respectively.

The two measures of construal (behavior descriptor and evaluation rationale) were positively related, but the strength of their correlation depended heavily on the specific episode. The two measures were thus not compiled into a single index, but subjected to separate analyses,

which yielded virtually identical results. Therefore, only the data based on the evaluation rationale are reported, because this index relies on relatively richer information (one- to two-sentence rationales of evaluation as opposed to one-word behavior descriptors).

*Evaluation.* All evaluative impressions were expressed on bipolar 11-point numerical scales ranging from -5 to 5.

### Results and Discussion

#### Alternativity of Moral and Competence Behavior Interpretations

The main prediction was that when an action is construed in moral terms, the degree to which the action will be construed in terms of competence decreases substantially (or vice versa). As can be seen in Table 2 (first column), cross-subject correlations between the two interpretations, computed for each episode separately, were all negative and strong. These correlations were high not only in the ambivalent episodes (virtuous failure and sinful success) but also in the univalent ones (virtuous success and sinful failure). This suggests, as predicted, that evaluative ambiguity of behavior is not a necessary precondition for the emergence of two alternative behavior construals. Apparently, existence of different behavior features referring to independent categories suffices to result in alternativity of behavior construal, even if the categories themselves are in no sense contradictory or mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, in the ambivalent episodes, correlations between impressions and each of the construals were not only significant but also strikingly divergent in sign (Table 1, columns 2 and 3). For Episodes 3 and 4 (virtuous failure), the moral interpretation correlated positively with evaluation, whereas the competence interpretation correlated negatively with evaluation. For Episodes 5 and 6 (sinful successes), this pattern was reversed. In the univalent episodes, an expectation was that the correlations would be similar for both types of behavior construal: positive for virtuous successes and negative for sinful failures. As can be seen in Table 2 (Episodes 1, 2, 7, and 8), the

Table 2  
*Correlations Between Competence and Moral Interpretations of the Same Behavior and Between the Two Interpretations and Evaluative Impressions as a Function of Episode Type (N = 115)*

Episode type	Competence/ morality	Competence/ evaluation	Morality/ evaluation
Virtuous success			
Episode 1	-.75***	-.04	.17*
Episode 2	-.81***	-.08	.22**
Virtuous failure			
Episode 3	-.67***	-.26**	.32***
Episode 4	-.54***	-.63***	.59***
Sinful success			
Episode 5	-.70***	.50***	-.69***
Episode 6	-.87***	.77***	-.88***
Sinful failure			
Episode 7	-.73***	.14	-.45***
Episode 8	-.85***	.36***	-.44***

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

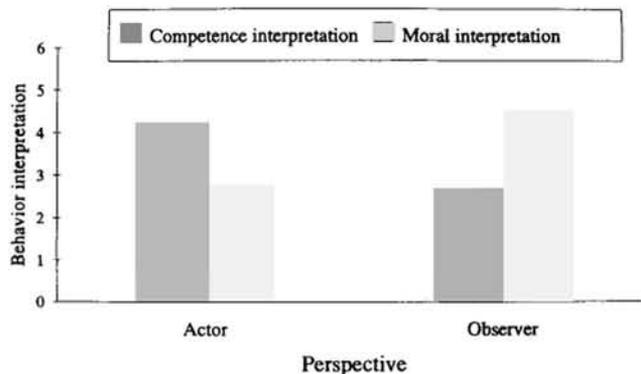


Figure 1. Competence and moral interpretation of behavior in the actor and the observer perspective (Study 1).

expected correlations emerged only for behavior construal in moral terms, whereas for the competence interpretation they appeared nonsignificant and in one case significant but paradoxical in sign (Episode 8). This pattern of results suggests that when evaluative implications of competence and moral construal of behavior are identical in sign, only the latter interpretation influences impressions in a regular, predictable way. The influence of competence interpretation on impressions seems to be equally predictable only when evaluative implications of the two types of construal are divergent.

#### Actor-Observer Perspective

The measure of behavior interpretation was subjected to a five-factor ANOVA with perspective, mode of its induction, and sex as between-subjects factors and action type and construal content as within-subjects factors. The analysis revealed a strong cross-over interaction between perspective and content of behavior interpretation,  $F(1, 107) = 126.76, p < .001$ , depicted in Figure 1. The interpretation of stimulus behaviors (aggregated over all episodes) in terms of competence was stronger for actors (4.20) than for observers (2.62),  $t(113) = 10.31, p < .001$ , whereas the moral interpretation was stronger for observers (4.46) than for actors (2.73),  $t(113) = 10.64, p < .001$ . Moreover, the within-actor difference between the two construals was significant,  $t(57) = 5.20, p < .001$ , as well as the opposite in direction difference between them within the observer perspective,  $t(56) = 9.04, p < .001$ .

The Perspective  $\times$  Interpretation  $\times$  Action Type interaction was also significant,  $F(3, 321) = 4.14, p < .005$ , although the basic interaction between perspective and interpretation remained significant at  $p < .001$  for all four action types, and so were all the actor-observer differences. This suggests quite a general nature of the actor-observer differences, which remain basically similar independently of evaluative implications of the two interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> However, the opportunity to observe these differences depends to a degree on the method by which the perspectives are induced, as suggested by a significant interaction involving perspective, interpretation, and mode of perspective induction,  $F(1, 107) = 22.80, p < .001$ . When

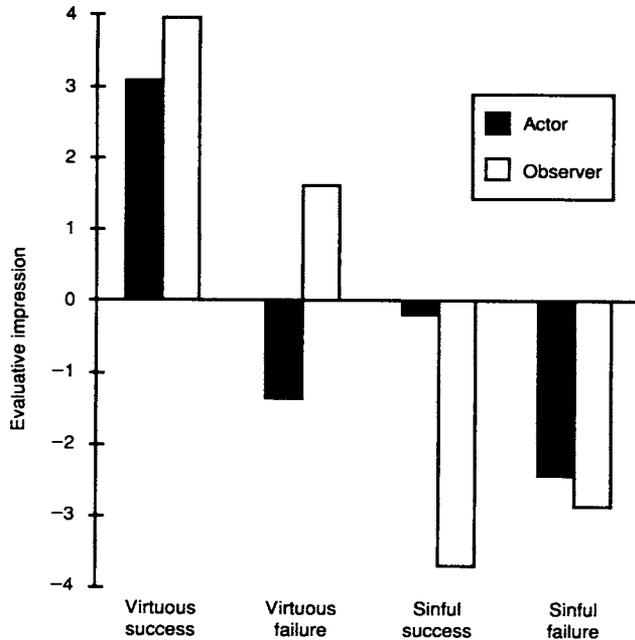


Figure 2. Evaluative impressions formulated in the actor and the observer perspective as a function of episode type (averaged over two replications within each episode type; Study 1).

An ANOVA was also performed on evaluative impressions with perspective, induction mode, and episode type as factors. This analysis revealed the theoretically trivial main effect of episode type,  $F(3, 321) = 404.04, p < .001$ . Virtuous successes yielded generally the highest (3.56), and sinful failures the lowest (-2.60), evaluations, with virtuous failures (0.17) and sinful successes (-1.88) located in between.

More interestingly, this main effect was partially qualified by the Perspective  $\times$  Action Type interaction,  $F(3, 321) = 94.46, p < .001$ . As can be seen in Figure 2, for the univalent action types (virtuous successes and sinful failures) the differences between actors and observers were small and negligible. For the two ambivalent action types, however, strikingly opposite differences

applied for the observer perspective, role playing and thought reconstruction led to virtually identical effects (for both manipulations the intensity of competence and moral interpretation was very close to the general pattern depicted in the right part of Figure 1). In the actor perspective conditions, however, the tendency to interpret behavior in competence terms was higher when induced by thought reconstruction rather than role playing (4.92 vs. 3.56), whereas the propensity to moral interpretation was lower when induced by the former manipulation (1.99 vs. 3.37). This pattern of results suggests that role playing may not be the best route to actor-perspective induction in the present context because it increases the tendency to present one's own behavior in moral terms, but inhibits the use of competence categories in comparison to the thought-reconstruction manipulation. Nevertheless, the basic Perspective  $\times$  Interpretation interaction was still significant, even when separately computed for the role-playing conditions,  $F(1, 55) = 19.55, p < .001$ .

between the two perspectives were found. Virtuous failures led actors to negative impressions (-1.32), whereas observers' impressions were clearly positive (1.65) and significantly higher,  $t(113) = 8.77, p < .001$ . This difference was reversed in the sinful success condition, where actors' impressions were virtually neutral (-0.15), whereas the observers came to extremely negative evaluations (-3.62), which were also of course significantly lower,  $t(113) = 9.04, p < .001$ .

This pattern of results is consistent with the hypothesis that actors' evaluations are more competence driven than those of observers, whereas the moral meaning of behavior underlies observers' evaluations to a higher degree than those of actors. Because subjects first gave an evaluative impression and then its rationale (which served as the basis of their behavior construal), it also suggests that subjects made the distinction of competence versus morality during initial encoding of behavioral information and not at the time of the assessment of their interpretations.

#### Perceiver's Sex

The perceiver's sex was expected to determine whether moral or competence construal is preferred within the actor perspective. The expected Perspective  $\times$  Interpretation  $\times$  Sex interaction for behavior construal appeared marginally significant,  $F(1, 107) = 3.65, p < .06$ . Both sexes yielded similar interpretations when entertaining the observer perspective. In the actor perspective, however, male subjects were more prone to competence interpretation (4.86 and 4.10), but less prone to moral interpretation (2.37 and 3.02), than were female subjects, in line with the hypothesis.

#### Discussion

It may be argued, however, that Study 1 involved not the perspective of an observer, but a less general perspective of the action recipient, a person who benefits from the actors' deeds or is harmed by them. To address this problem, I conducted an additional study, providing 27 students with the descriptions of eight episodes used in Study 1. The subjects were not asked to take the perspective of an actor or an action recipient but rather to interpret and evaluate the actions from their own (uninvolved observers) point of view. In other points the procedure was identical to that of Study 1. The cross-episode average of moral construal was 3.92, whereas the average competence construal was 2.71, a significant difference,  $t(26) = 3.12, p < .005$ . Quite logically, noninvolved observers produced slightly weaker moral interpretations than the involved action recipients in the observer condition of Study 1 (3.92 vs. 4.46). Otherwise, however, responses in these two conditions were very similar, suggesting that in the observer perspective the moral construal prevails over competence independently of whether the observer is personally involved or uninvolved in the behavior construed.

#### Study 2

The episodes used in Study 1 involved quite mundane actions in various contexts. However, their representativeness of real-

life situations may be questioned, because they were devised to be amenable to both competence and moral interpretation. Therefore, a second study was conducted in which subjects provided descriptions and interpretations of actual episodes out of their own past. The descriptions contained information about (subject's own or an other's) behavior and about the subject's thoughts concerning this behavior. The thoughts were then scored for the presence of competence and morality considerations. The descriptions were expected to involve either competence or morality considerations, but not both of them at the same time. Competence considerations were expected to accompany thinking about one's own rather than an other's behavior, whereas moral concern was expected to be more pronounced in thinking about an other's conduct. The previously discussed influence of sex was expected as well.

### Method

#### Procedure

The study was introduced as research on people's recollections of important life events. Subjects were asked to recall and describe five recent episodes that had led to positive evaluation of the self as well as five episodes that had led to negative self-evaluation. They were also asked to describe episodes that had led to positive or negative evaluation of another person. The order of the episode types was systematically varied (and had no effect on the dependent measures).

Subjects were handed small booklets and asked to describe each episode on a separate sheet. When describing self-related episodes subjects were to recall behaviors that did the following:

led you to think about yourself in a clearly positive [negative] way. Please answer the following: (1) what did you do, (2) what did you in effect think about yourself, (3) why did you think or feel in that way?

When describing other-related episodes, subjects were to recall another person's behavior that did the following:

led you to think about that person in a clearly positive [negative] way. Please, write down (1) who it was (do not use names, but general descriptions, e.g., a friend, a neighbor, etc.), (2) what did he or she do, (3) what did you in effect think about him or her, (4) why did you think or feel in that way?

When all episodes were described, subjects estimated how vivid each recollection was and how strong their evaluation of the self or the other person was. Finally, subjects rated how much their own evaluations were based on competence and moral considerations. To stress subjects' anonymity, the study was run in groups of about 10 in one session that lasted about 90 min. At the end of the session subjects were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

#### Subjects

Seventy-five university students participated. Six subjects produced episodes that did not follow instructions. Only responses containing at least two episodes of each type (self vs. other and positive vs. negative) were accepted, and 4 subjects did not meet this criterion. The data of 34 male and 31 female subjects were analyzed.

#### Dependent Measures

All episodes were rated by two judges (unaware of hypotheses) for the degree to which the content of subjects' thoughts and interpretations

reflected competence and moral concern. Both judgments were made on scales ranging from 0 to 6, similar to those used in Study 1. A typical episode rated as highly saturated with competence meaning but of no moral bearing is as follows:

When I passed my entrance examination to the university, I was very proud of myself. Many applicants didn't pass the exam, so I felt quite good that I was able to do it. (self/positive)

A typical episode rated as highly saturated with moral meaning but of no competence bearing is as follows:

One day my father hurt himself badly when doing something in the cellar. I went to our nearest neighbor to ask for help, to drive Father to a doctor or a hospital. But that swine refused, saying that my father's condition would stain his upholstery. I was outraged! We had helped him so many times. (other/negative)

An episode rated as saturated with neither moral nor competence meaning is as follows:

I remember one day when I saw a couple of youngsters at a train station. They were hugging and kissing each other. It was a very sad and rainy day, but seeing them made me feel much better. I just felt better looking at them. (other/positive)

The between-raters correlations (computed for a random subsample of 10 subjects, who yielded altogether 181 episode descriptions) were  $r(180) = .81$  for competence and  $r(180) = .85$  for morality judgments. Therefore, ratings of the two judges were averaged, yielding the thought content index for competence and moral interpretations, respectively.

Having described all recollected episodes, the subjects rated the vividness of each recollection (on a scale ranging from 0 to 6). Next, they were asked for their self- or other evaluations in each episode on a scale ranging from  $-5$  (negative) to  $5$  (positive), with a midpoint of 0 indicating neutrality. Finally, the participants were asked to rate the subjective rationale of their evaluations on two scales of similar format to that used by the judges. These ratings provided an additional evaluation rationale index of episode interpretation.

### Results

#### Alternativity of Moral and Competence Construals

On the average, each subject produced 8.77 self-related episodes and 8.52 other-related ones. These two episode types were entirely comparable in terms of vividness ratings, which were 3.31 and 3.50, respectively. Intensity of evaluation, however, was significantly lower for the self- than for other-related episodes (3.16 vs. 3.70),  $F(1, 61) = 36.58$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Of 1,124 episodes analyzed, 296 (26%) had a clear competence-related interpretation (i.e., the thought content index for competence equalled at least the scale midpoint, 3.00) and 464 (42%) had a clear moral interpretation (defined in a similar way). For as few as 56 (5%) episodes the two interpretations were strong at the same time (i.e., both interpretations at least equalled 3.00), and only 308 (27%) episodes yielded neither competence nor moral interpretation of such a high degree.

These results suggest that moral and competence interpretations indeed are paramount in construal of real-life behaviors (at least those recalled as leading to clear-cut evaluative impressions of the self or others). Still, they were used in an alternative rather than simultaneous way, as suggested by the very low frequency of episodes that were strongly interpreted both in competence and moral terms.

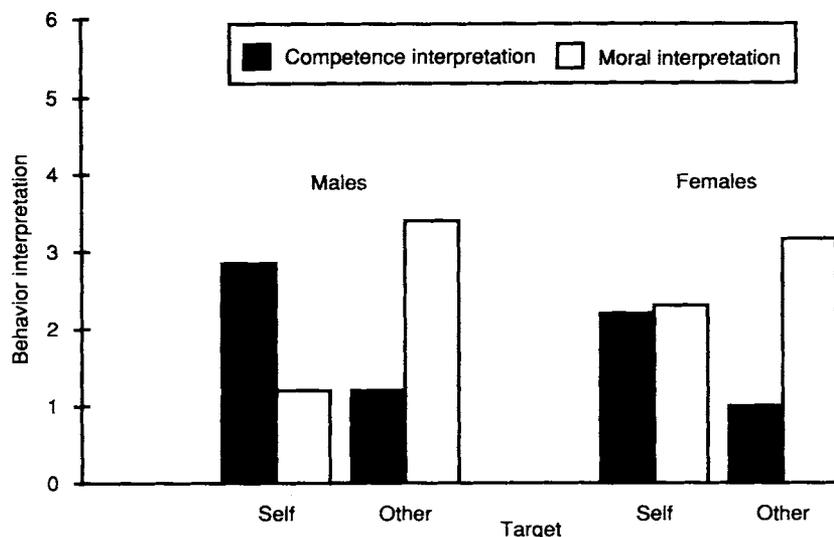


Figure 3. Competence and moral interpretation of the self- and other-related episodes recollected by male and female subjects (Study 2).

### Behavior Interpretation

The thought content index was averaged within each of the four episode types and subjected to a four-way ANOVA, with sex as a between-subjects factor and episode target (self and other), episode valence (positive and negative), and episode interpretation (competence and moral) as within-subjects factors. This analysis revealed the expected cross-over interaction between episode target and episode interpretation,  $F(1, 61) = 90.50, p < .001$ , with the competence interpretation more pronounced for the self- than for the other-related episodes (2.55 and 1.28, respectively), whereas the opposite was true for the moral interpretation (1.14 and 3.33). The Sex  $\times$  Interpretation interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 61) = 4.53, p < .05$ , with the competence interpretation stronger for male rather than for female subjects, but moral interpretation relatively weaker for male subjects. However, both these interactions were partially qualified by a second-order interaction involving sex, target, and interpretation,  $F(1, 61) = 7.17, p < .01$ .

As illustrated in Figure 3, for male subjects, the obtained pattern faithfully replicated the main finding of Study 1: The competence interpretation was stronger for the self (2.86) than for others (1.27),  $t(33) = 5.28, p < .001$ , whereas the moral construal was stronger for others (3.45) than for the self (1.24),  $t(33) = 8.27, p < .001$ . Furthermore, within the self target, the competence interpretation was stronger than that in moral terms,  $t(33) = 4.77, p < .001$ , but the opposite in direction difference emerged within the other target,  $t(33) = 6.07, p < .001$ .

For female subjects the pattern was different in one respect: They showed no preference for the competence over the moral interpretation of their own behavior. However, the remaining differences were significant, as well as the Target  $\times$  Interpretation interaction, even when the latter was computed for female subjects alone,  $F(1, 29) = 27.56, p < .001$ . It is also clear from Figure 3 that the sex difference concerned only subjects' own

behavior. Whereas female subjects construed their behavior in less competence-related terms than male subjects (2.22 vs. 2.86),  $t(63) = 2.08, p < .05$ , the former also used moral terms to a relatively greater extent (2.32 vs. 1.24),  $t(63) = 3.62, p < .001$ .

None of the described effects was significantly influenced by episode valence. All of them, however, were replicated in an ANOVA performed on the measure of subjective rationale of evaluation (i.e., the ratings provided by subjects themselves, not the judges). In particular, the theoretically crucial interactions between the target and interpretation,  $F(1, 61) = 26.36, p < .001$ , and involving the target, interpretation, and sex,  $F(1, 61) = 6.35, p < .025$ , emerged in the same shape as illustrated in Figure 3.

### Discussion

These results remain open to different interpretations. First, the observed differences might reflect not only the behavior construal process but also processes of information retrieval or reconstructive memory. Second, specific contents of the self- and other-related information varied in an uncontrollable way, which decreases their comparability. However, information processed by subjects in Study 2 was not manipulated in any way, and the results were still close to the Study 1 findings, where memory processes played no role and the actor-observer perspective differentiation was applied to identical information.

Finally, Study 2 suggests that most of the emotionally involving behaviors recalled by people from their own past pertain either to moral or to competence considerations. Moral and competence-related categories seem to be frequently used in the construal of those behaviors that result in clear-cut evaluations of the self or others. This is in line with other studies showing the importance and prevalence of these two types of categories in political perception (moral and competence-related traits are

central in the perception of presidents and presidential hopefuls; Kinder & Sears, 1985) and in person perception in general (the dimensions of socially good-bad and intellectually good-bad underlie implicit theories of personality; Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972).

### General Discussion

Despite their divergent methods, the present studies yielded convergent results that shed an interesting light on the basis of multiple behavior meanings and differences between the actor and observer perspective.

#### *Multiple Meanings of Behavior*

Study 1's findings suggest that content of the actor's goal and whether the goal is successfully achieved or not constitute two independent features of behavior and that each of them give rise to a distinct interpretation of this behavior. Successfully helping another person (virtuous success and also a typical episode recollected in Study 2), for instance, may be a sign of both morality and competence, and encoding the behavior in one of these categories in no way precludes the possibility of using another category as well. Still, subjects tended to use these categories in an alternative way.

This preference for a single construal where a number of different interpretations is possible has several other manifestations, as discussed and shown by Griffin and Ross (1991). According to these authors "people typically generate a single construal of an ambiguous or incompletely specified situation and then make judgments as if their situational construals corresponded to perfect situational knowledge" (p. 345). The present results suggest that critical information need not be unclear or impoverished in any way (as implied by such qualifiers as *ambiguous* or *incomplete* typically used in this context) to instigate divergent interpretations in different perceivers. Even if the information is perfectly clear in reach and detail, its divergent construals are still possible and even more probable, because different details may underlie different meanings of the same information. In effect, the contribution of "subjective" factors in the construal of social stimuli is not confined to conditions where their "objective" meaning is weak or indefinite. Such an "objective" meaning simply does not exist, as the meaning is always supplied by the perceiver (Neisser, 1976).

The question of whether people use mainly one behavior encoding type when two or more of them are possible has been a subject of some controversy (cf. Clark, 1991; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). The present data extend the scarce empirical support for the alternative use of different behavior construals when this alternativity is independent from purely linguistic factors (i.e., contradictory meanings of relevant categories that make them impossible to be used at the same time). The mere existence of multiple behavior features, associated with different cognitive categories, can underlie multiplicity of behavior meanings.

The idea of feature multiplicity has important theoretical consequences, because it increases considerably the range of behaviors that can be regarded as amenable to different interpretations. The vagueness or ambiguity approach prevailing in

social cognition research implies that differential construal of the same behavior is a phenomenon rather limited in its scope (to vague or ambiguous behaviors). Indeed, priming effects are typically greater in judgments of vague than unequivocal behaviors and tend to be unreliable in the latter case (Srull & Wyer, 1979, 1980). Formulating recently their law of cognitive structure activation, Sedikides and Skowronski (1991) limited the activation effects to stimuli "ambiguous enough to be encodable as an instance of multiple cognitive structures" (p. 170). Some researchers consider this to be a serious limitation of the law when applied to natural, presumably rather unambiguous, situations (Jussim, 1991). On the other side, Higgins (1991) argued that the cognitive structure activation effects need not be limited to ambiguous stimuli, which would considerably expand the law, though research showing activation effects in construal of unambiguous behaviors is scarce. What is, then, the actual scope of activation effects?

The notion of multiple behavior features may help to resolve this controversy. Were the vagueness or ambiguity the sole factor underlying different interpretations of the same behavior, the activation effects would be relatively limited. However, provided that different meanings of the same behavior may arise from its various features, the activation effects may apply to quite a wide range of behaviors, indeed, to any behavior characterized by at least two features when each of them is associated with a different piece of knowledge stored in the perceiver's mind. Both narrow and wide interpretations of the law of cognitive structure activation seem to be justified, depending on the bases of multiplicity of behavior meaning that are taken into account. Although the present studies have not directly manipulated activation processes, their results suggest that the range of behaviors amenable to the activation effects may be much wider than implied by the classical vagueness/ambiguity research.

#### *Actor-Observer Differences*

The studies reported here repeatedly found that observers tend to view others' behavior in moral rather than competence-related terms, whereas actors show an exactly opposite tendency. What is the mechanism underlying these differences?

Differences in the activation level of relevant categories probably play a key role in the actor-observer divergences. Competence-related terms are more accessible in the actor than the observer perspective, whereas moral categories are more accessible in the observer position. This is evidenced by the content of rationale of evaluative impressions (gathered in both studies), as well as by the content of one-word descriptors of the target behavior gathered in Study 1 (where actors used such descriptors as *clever* or *well-done*, whereas observers more frequently described the same behavior as *helping* or *concern*). Both top-down and bottom-up processes of activation could have contributed to these differences in activation.

In the top-down process, perceivers' goals and motives activate concepts that are related to those goals (Bruner, 1957; Higgins, 1989). Because competence-related categories are more motivationally relevant in the actor than in the observer perspective, concepts referring to competence are more accessible for actors. Similarly, because moral categories are typically

more relevant for observers, moral concepts are more accessible in this perspective.<sup>2</sup>

In the bottom-up process, perceivers' goals and concerns direct their attention to particular features of the behavior in question. Those features that are attended to (salient) constitute the main perceptual input that automatically activates related concepts. Because actors and observers pay attention to different behavioral features, the same behavior may activate different concepts in their minds. For instance, Bandura's (1989) research found that because people have to monitor closely the effectiveness of their actions to reach their goals, actors usually pay much attention to their own skill. This, in turn, activates competence-related concepts, which because they are highly accessible, influence the interpretation of subsequently received information. Observers, who are less concerned with the behavior execution, pay less attention to its efficiency, and their competence-related concepts have a smaller chance of being activated and used in the interpretation of subsequently processed information.

These top-down and bottom-up processes of increasing concept accessibility may instigate each other (cf. Higgins, 1989) and should be probably seen as two components of the same process of knowledge activation. The present studies cannot discern between these two components—probably both of them underlie the actor–observer differences in concept accessibility and behavior construal. What these studies seem to suggest, however, is that the differential applicability or appropriateness of concepts plays an independent role in addition to that of accessibility. Within the actor perspective, female subjects used moral categories to a higher extent, but competence-related ones to a lower extent, than male subjects. As these differences did not appear in the observer perspective (cf. Figure 3), they cannot be explained in terms of sex differences in chronic accessibility of moral and competence concepts. Rather, they probably follow from differences in what constitutes an appropriate frame of reference in understanding the behavior of men and women. Because, as a social role theorist of sex differences put it, “people believe that women more than men ought to manifest the communal qualities . . . and that men, more than women, ought to manifest the agentic qualities” (Eagly, 1987, p. 23).

The most discussed conceptualization of the actor–observer differences in social cognition has been introduced by Jones and Nisbett (1971), who hypothesized that when explaining their own behavior people look for situational rather than dispositional reasons, but when explaining others' behavior they prefer dispositional ones. Empirical research suggests that actors indeed produce relatively more situational attributions than observers, but in absolute terms both actors and observers show a preference for dispositional explanations of behavior (Watson, 1982). The present research suggests still a difference at this point, a difference in the content of dispositional inferences drawn in the two perspectives.

However, the present actor–observer differences are more restricted than the classical Jones–Nisbett (1971) ones. The present analysis suggests that the content-related differences should emerge only within certain limits. First, both competence and moral categories should be related to features of a behavioral act in question. The act should involve one person doing some-

thing good or bad for another, and doing it in a clearly efficient or inefficient way. This is a powerful constraint because numerous actions involve no benefits or harm to others and therefore have no moral meaning. Similarly, a large number of mundane acts, even if beneficial or harmful to others, do not involve a clear efficiency component (e.g., doing small favors is too easy to invite a competence-related interpretation).

Second, to secure the present actor–observer differences in behavior construal, the moral and competence categories should be equally applicable to the act in question. In many cases this condition is not met because one of the meanings is conspicuous. It is hard to interpret winning the Nobel prize in physics other than in competence terms, whereas a successful bank robbery remains primarily an immoral act, despite all the brilliant planning and execution it could have required.

A final constraint has to do with specific tasks or motivations that can increase the relevance of moral categories in the actor perspective and competence categories in the observer position. For instance, when both a positive and a negative categorization of behavior is equally applicable, in ego-involving contexts actors will probably prefer the positive one to protect their self-esteem. This would result in reversing the actor–observer differences in virtuous failure situations (because the moral interpretation allows a positive self-evaluation). Similarly, when observers are motivated to reach specific, positive or negative conclusions about an actor (e.g., because of their initial attitude toward the actor), they may be more driven by evaluative implications of behavior construal than by its moral or competence-related content. Clearly, despite their reliability in the research reported, the present actor–observer differences in the content of behavior construal may be expected only in a restricted range of naturally occurring behaviors.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of greater motivational relevance of moral categories to observers and competence-related ones to actors was empirically supported in a separate correlational study ( $N = 116$ ). A list of 50 personality traits was presented to three groups of subjects who estimated the extent to which each of the traits pertained to morality, or competence, and whether a trait was profitable (rewarding or harmful) for a person having the trait or for other people interacting with the person. The more a trait pertained to competence, the more subjects estimated the trait as profitable mainly to the person having the trait (i.e., the actor) rather than to others (observers),  $r = .52, p < .01$ . The more a trait pertained to morality, the more subjects estimated the trait as profitable primarily for other people ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ).

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